



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Great God, small screen,
perfect family?
Episode 1*

The Garden to Jesus

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INTRO TO SERIES

Proverbs 11.28 Exploit or abuse your family, and end up with a fistful of air; common sense tells you it's a stupid way to live.

For the last several years we have done a “God at the Movies” worship series where we look at themes in film and how they intersect with our lives and the Biblical story. This year, we’re going to the small screen. In this case small screen means television, though our smart phones are also small screen. For now, let’s look at TV. I have a feeling that in fall we will have a smart phone series coming into view.

But for now let’s think about the small screen as TV. And particularly the images of family that are portrayed on the small screen. Just like in the movie series we don’t want to demonize all entertainment as inherently good or bad. We do want to filter what we see through the lenses of who we are as followers of Jesus.

Over the next four weeks, using TV shows and their images of family (through the years) we are going to dig in. We’re going to go about this in a few ways. These first two weeks we’re going to talk about our immediate families. Then in the last two weeks we’ll talk about the benefits and limits of viewing our church body as a family and how we can think about the world as our global family. For example, would it surprise you to know that the Bible never compares a gathering like this to a family?

Then we’ll talk about if we understand all of humanity as our brothers and sisters then what are the implications for how we think about the world? Our politics? International boundaries? Climate change?

All the while having some fun with TV shows that can help us dig in to the topics. For today, let’s think about what makes a perfect family and what God wants for our families.

And let’s start with a clip from a classic: *Leave it to Beaver*.

2 Many harken back to this era as the golden age of family. A time when men were men, women were women, and kids did mostly what they were told to do. **When you think of the perfect family we've been fed this image of family for decades on TV.** Ward and June, Wally and The Beaver. Apparently, June spent her days keeping the perfect home while impeccably dressed. Ward brought home **the bacon and dispensed wisdom.** It was a time when getting kids to wash up was portrayed as a family concern. We all know that most families have a little more dirt than that, so to speak.

If we do buy into this model as a perfect family, What messages do the Cleavers send? About gender roles? About class and race, and family configuration? Clearly not all bad and not all good. They were loving and committed and supportive of one another. But if this is the only image of family we see, or the image that is portrayed as the perfect family what about the family where the man is more gifted to care for the kids and the woman is the bread winner? Or a family with two moms or two dads? Or content single person? Or the couple who can't or doesn't want to have children? Or adopts children? Or families who are black or Asian or Latino? Or like my childhood family where the parents are divorced?

Setting the Cleavers up as the perfect family has some pitfalls. I wonder what the Bible says.

BIBLICAL FAMILIES

There are some wonderful Biblical examples of family, often in unexpected family systems and alignments.

- Ruth and Naomi's family bond as mother and daughter-in-law was thicker than blood.
- A few weeks ago we looked at Lois, Eunice and Timothy. A Grandmother, mother and son were the backbone of one of the first Christian churches.

But we have to exercise caution when looking to the Bible for a rock solid definition of what a family looks or acts like. **Jesus**

didn't really talk specifically about family life.

And in the Hebrew Bible, the beginning of our **great** family of faith, some of the examples laid down by the heroic patriarchs of the church, were less-than stellar.

- Jacob stealing his father's blessing from Esau, aided and imbedded by his mother—talk about playing favorites!
- Joseph's murderous brothers who threw him into a pit with intent to kill, and then fabricated an elaborate story to lie to their father about it all (of course that's not the end of the story).

None of us would say that the Bible's first family, Adam, Eve, two brothers, and a murder was the perfect family! Maybe it looks like Abraham's family? After all, Abraham is often thought of as the patriarch of the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian peoples. That family started as a husband and a wife (Abram and Sarai), (actually it started as a half-brother and half-sister who became husband and wife), but when no children were being born it became a husband, a wife and their slave, Hagar, who Abraham forced himself upon, which did give him the son he was looking for, Ishmael. Then it became a husband, a slave who bore a son, Ishmael, and a wife who then also bore a son, Isaac. At which point Hagar and Ishmael were sent to the desert to die.

Then after Sarah died, Abraham is recorded as being "remarried" to Keturah and had six more sons. Though in First Chronicles she's known as Abraham's "concubine."

Point being, today, none of these last examples are what we would imagine today as healthy families. As always, we have to use caution when applying the Biblical story.

The Bible's families are more like *The Simpsons*.

The Simpsons were criticized when released, partially because it was somewhat crude, but also because it showed the imperfection of families: the rebellious son, the non-conformist and brilliant daughter who does things like playing jazz saxophone

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while everyone else drones on, the irresponsible and lazy father, the bickering siblings. And as we saw in that clip, the ugliness of the world in which we live: Crusty the Clown maximizing profits at the expense of families. Even though it was animated, it was real.

And that is precisely a large part of the value we find in the Bible. What is great about our Bible is what the Cleavers lacked. It's real. Family can be messy, ugly, violent, painful. And redemptive, loving, life-giving.

PERFECT FAMILY

So what is the perfect family? In families, we have the ability and blessing to be places of love and commitment, a harbor in the storms of life. And of course that can happen even when families don't fit the conventional mold. It's not a husband, a wife, 1.8 kids, a golden retriever and white picket fence, and the beautifully curated Facebook page that makes a family. It is love and devotion and understanding. It's accountability with empathy. And it's so much more.

What are we doing to build our families in these ways? To be Loving. Committed. Accountable but empathetic? A place where each member of the family can grow and thrive into who God is creating them to be? How can we as a congregation support one another in this quest for all of us? Including our individual families.

I am going to pause there, we have three more weeks to talk about this. Well as they say, tune in next week. Don't miss next week's episode when we will delve deeper into what God wishes for our families, even when, especially when brokenness and pain are a part of our reality.

