

FAMILYBASE

PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

4 BIBLE STUDIES

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The Jubilee Centre is a Christian research and campaigning centre seeking to apply biblical principles to social and economic issues of relevance today. In 1987 FAMILYBASE was launched to give context to the various concerns which the Jubilee Centre's research had highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

These Bible studies are designed with small group study particularly in mind. They can also, however, form the basis of personal study or as foundations for sermon preparation. With this in mind a brief background is provided with each study to point the way.

The background information is not, however, designed to provide either a full theology or a note on all possible interpretations of the passage under discussion, or of other relevant passages. If however the studies are used in group discussion, making each person aware of the material in the notes will aid the progress and understanding of the study. The studies are produced in a form which does not preclude the provision of one booklet for each group member.

For the student who wishes to delve deeper we would suggest a good set of commentaries. Additional resources are not however essential for you to grasp the basic points of the studies.

The aim of these four studies entitled 'Putting families first' is to answer the question 'Who cares?' The balance between the different responsibilities to our families of government, church and family are addressed.

In the story of Naboth's vineyard the responsibility of the state to protect family roots was usurped by a scheming Jezebel. In the second study we see how caring for the family had been neglected under the guise of religious responsibilities. The third study discusses the respective role of church and family in caring for dependent relatives or other dependent individuals. The final study encourages us to see our responsibilities to the immediate family in learning to live and grow together.

We trust that in studying God's Word in this way many Christians will become more aware of their responsibilities to their families. We should then seek to apply this understanding to our church life and to our consideration of government policies and their impact on our families. If the disintegration of family life and the related moral and social evils are to be halted, the first step must be to safeguard family roots and encourage family networks to flourish.

Who cares for family roots and responsibilities?

1 Kings 21:1-16

BACKGROUND

Ahab was King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel for 22 years between c.874-852 BC. He was married to Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon and arch-enemy of Elijah.

To understand this passage we must be aware of the nature of land ownership and family responsibilities in Israel. On entering the Promised Land about 300 years previous to this time, the land had been apportioned to the various tribes, clans and families of the Israelites. There were very specific rules about how land should remain the property of each family throughout the generations. In an agricultural society this was essential if families were not to slide into poverty from which there could be no reasonable hope of escape.

Leviticus 25 provides us with the details of the various land laws which safeguarded families. They are based first on the fact that the land belongs ultimately to God. It is then required that the land observe a sabbath to the Lord (sound agricultural policy!) after every six years. Every seventh sabbath (i.e. every 49th year) land was to revert to its original owner. There were also additional rules about buying and selling land between the 'years of Jubilee'.

Exactly how closely these rules were adhered to is not clear from the Bible. There are however many instances which show the very strong tie that the Israelites had with specific pieces of land. Naboth is one such instance. The fact that II Kings 9:26 mentions the blood of both Naboth and his sons also suggests that Jezebel may have been conscious, if not respectful, of the family rights over a piece of land.

At a time when the worship of God was being increasingly undermined by outside influences, this story gives us a clear indication of the impact such a decline could have on one particular family.

QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 Describe the sort of feelings and sense of responsibility felt by Naboth as he responded to Ahab in v 3.
- 2 Why do you think Ahab did not insist on having the land? Can you explain why Jezebel from Sidon should be so surprised at his seeming weakness (Deut 17:14-20)?
- 3 What sort of manipulation precedes the death of Naboth?
- 4 Why do you think Ahab's punishment in v 21 was so harsh and involved his whole family?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 5 Are there equivalent examples today of people regarding a piece of land, a country or even a particular house as their roots?
- 6 What benefits do roots bring us?
- 7 What pressures are there in today's society which threaten the retention of roots?
- 8 Whose responsibility is it to safeguard roots - the state or the family?
- 9 Are there any ways in which roots are (or could be) safeguarded in today's society?

Who cares for parents?

Mark 7:5-13

BACKGROUND

Respect for parents is of paramount importance in distinguishing the children of Israel as the people of God. Not only is the call to honour parents one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12, Deut 5:16), but it is regularly given prominence in the Levitical laws (e.g. Lev 19:1-3). How the Jews of Jesus' time had managed to set aside this law is quite difficult to understand.

The context for this disagreement between Jesus and the Jews is set alongside another question regarding that of ceremonial washing of hands (Mark 7:1-4). Jesus was obviously wanting to make the broader point of the Jews' trivialities when it came to observing the rituals and appendages of the law rather than the heart of it. The passage does, however, also challenge us as to the excuses we sometimes make to get out of our family responsibilities.

The Pharisees followed a separate book of instructions called the 'halakah'. This interpreted and added to the Old Testament law. In practice they gave it authority over and above the law itself.

The Corban tradition (v11) was probably a device by which a man could give or lend his money to the temple. In so doing he could say to his parents that he had no money left over to look after them. It may have been that, when they died, he could redeem this money again for his own use. Jesus, however, condemns this practice. He says that it defeats the purpose of the law and is tantamount to cursing one's parents. He also implies that honouring one's father and mother includes the obligation to provide for them financially.

The passage has broader implications as it is a case study about a clash of cultures. What should the Christian disciple do when some aspect of his culture clashes with Biblical teaching? Jesus is quite categoric in his answer.

QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 Do you think there is any reason why Jesus chose the question of responsibilities to parents as His example of God's law being set aside by the Jews' traditions?
- 2 What sort of impact would Jesus' quote from Isaiah have had on His audience?
- 3 According to Jesus what exactly were the Jews recommending in the Corban practice?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 4 Do you think our interpretation of 'honouring' our parents is taken more from our Western culture or from Biblical teaching?
- 5 What excuses do we make for not visiting or caring for our parents?
- 6 If Jesus condemns giving money to the temple when one's parents were in need, what do you think He would say to our current practice of contributing towards our own pensions if our parents were similarly in financial need?
- 7 In which ways do the following 'commitments' obscure or lessen our sense of obligation to honour our parents:
 - (a) our children?
 - (b) the Church?
 - (c) our job?
 - (d) society's values?
 - (e) our lifestyle and friends?
- 8 Do you think there are any circumstances in which it is right for Christians to neglect their parents?

Who cares for dependent relatives?

1 Timothy 5:1-10,16

BACKGROUND

The care of widows among the Jews was a matter of regular concern (Ex 22:22, Deut 10:18, 1 Kings 17:17-24, Isaiah 1:17, Ezekiel 22:7, Acts 6:1, Luke 7:11-17, James 1:27). The root of this concern is intricately wound up with the nature of Israel's social structure. The most important social unit was the extended family. It was within this context that welfare was provided and the needs of the destitute were met. However, because land was held almost exclusively by the male line, the widowed and the fatherless were extremely vulnerable.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 laid down special arrangements for the provision of food to the fatherless and the widows by the local community. However, in the New Testament when the Church confronted large urban situations, and expanded to include Greek, Roman and other nationals, it would seem that a similar scheme for the central administration of welfare was draining its resources. Paul had to reaffirm to these Greek Christians the fact that it was in the first instance the responsibility of the family to provide for the widow.

The context of the passage is that Paul is writing to Timothy about how he should run the Church. The question of widows comes between a discussion of how to deal with older men and women and how to deal with the spiritual leaders or elders of the church. It seems that in this new urban environment Christians were neglecting responsibilities to elderly relatives, and arguing that such responsibilities should be shouldered by the Church rather than by themselves.

Today there are several groups who fall within the category of being economically dependent: the widow, the orphan, the single parent, the unemployed and the elderly person. It seems that in each and every case, responsibility for the care of these people has been taken over by state or voluntary bodies. Perhaps, like Paul, these institutions also have a case to challenge the family to consider its obligations to the dependent members of our society. Where these people are members of our own family we have a particular responsibility to care.

QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 In which ways do you think widows were needy in the time of Paul and Timothy and how do these compare with the needs of those who are dependent on others today?
- 2 What does v8 show about the importance which Paul places on caring for members of the **extended** family, and the **immediate** family?
- 3 What does v16 suggest about the respective responsibilities of the Church and the family in caring for those in need?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 4 Give specific examples of how Christians you know 'put their religion into practice' by helping those members of their family who are in need?
- 5 What do you think is the current position in relation to the provision of welfare by the state, by the family and by the Church?
- 6 Think of specific members of your extended family who are lonely, unemployed or in some other way dependent. What steps could you take to provide greater help and support?

Who cares for our growth together?

Ephesians 5:21-6:4

BACKGROUND

In Roman society, and to a lesser extent in Jewish family life, there were some very clear hierarchies. Paul's teaching in this passage and others cannot possibly be said to reflect this view. He puts great stress on the need for partnerships and mutuality - a position which would have been revolutionary in his day.

The analogy of husband and wife with respect to God's relation to Israel and Christ's relation to the Church is a recurring one in the Bible (e.g. Isaiah 54:1-8, Matthew 9:15). In v25 the word used for love is 'agape' which goes beyond sexual attraction and the natural affection found within a family. Agape is selfless love, always seeking the good of the other.

The meaning in Eph. 6:2 of *'the first commandment with a promise'* (NIV) has been debated at length. The most generally accepted explanation is to suggest that whilst all commands are equally from God, there is a certain primacy of this command because it relates to the most fundamental of human relationships. This type of reasoning is used elsewhere with respect to the commandments (e.g. Mark 12:28).

QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 What do you think Paul sees as being in greatest danger of going wrong in the family with respect to wives, husbands, children and parents?
- 2 How does Paul's use of the analogy of Christ's relationship to the Church help us to understand the marriage relationship (vv 24-28)?
- 3 How do the instructions in the passage contribute towards unity and a removal of hostilities within the family?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 4 How does 'agape' love (i.e. selfless love) help us to grow together as families?
- 5 What aspect of this passage challenges you most profoundly and why?
- 6 What can we learn from the passage about the parents' role in educating the children (6:4)? Do we ever abrogate these responsibilities to others, for example Sunday school teachers?
- 7 What ways might there be for the Church and individual Christians to help young parents with this task?