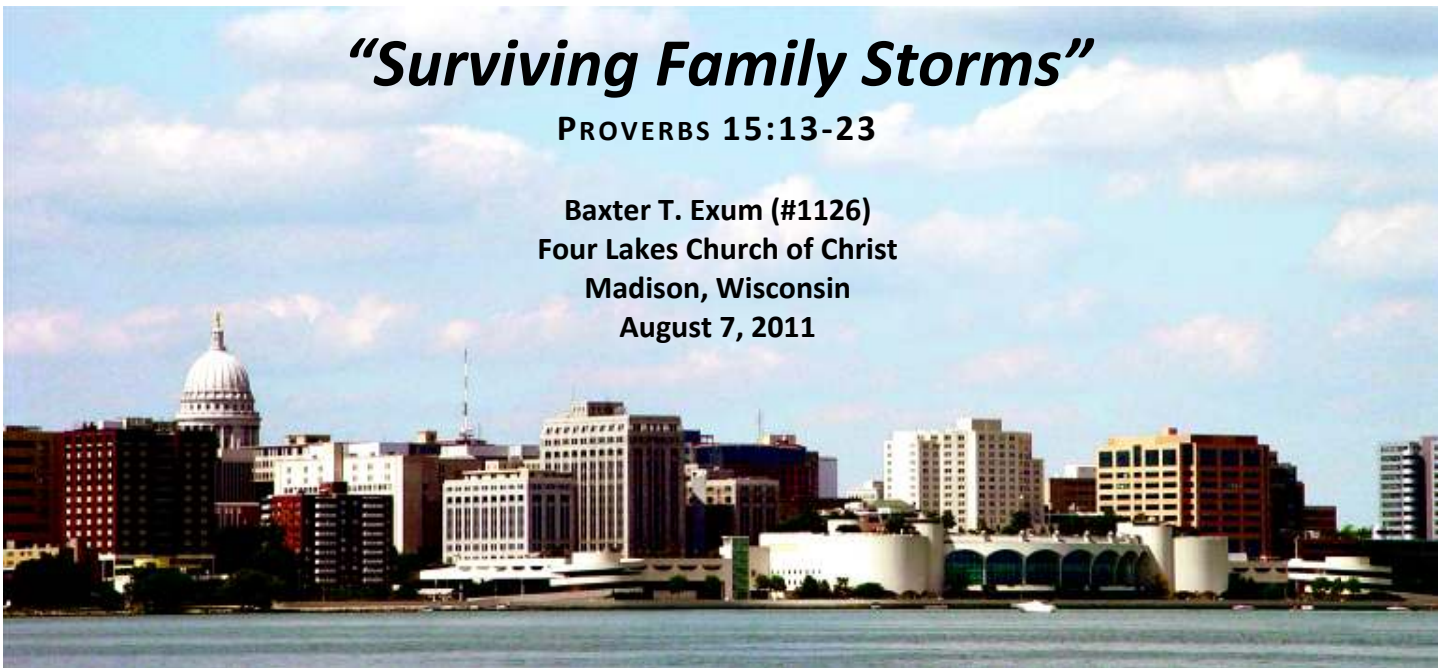


“Surviving Family Storms”

PROVERBS 15:13-23

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Most of us here this morning would probably agree that marriage as God planned it is facing some serious challenges. We look at marriage as it is portrayed on television and in the movies, and we understand that marriage itself is rarely respected. My wife and I have a little disagreement here: Sometimes she watches “Everybody Loves Raymond,” and I just cannot stand that show anymore. As you know, there is not a single man on that show who can ever do anything right. So, I very lovingly refer to it as the “She-Woman Man Hater Show.” When I first used that term, I thought I was just making it up, but apparently there is actually a group on Facebook now, “The She-Woman Man Hater Club,” and it goes back to a Little Rascal’s episode and the “He-Man Woman Hater’s Club.” Nevertheless, marriage is rarely respected in the media. We look around us, and we see God’s original plan insulted when couples of the same gender make a public commitment to each other and label it as “marriage,” although it is not. As Christians, we strongly oppose this, and yet the surveys show that 45% of U.S. adults approve of same-sex marriage (up from 35% just two years ago). We look around us, and we see that the popularity of marriage itself is slipping. In 1950, married couple households made up 78% of the population in this country, but as of last year, that figure had slipped to 48%. Fewer people, therefore, are even getting married at all. Contributing to the decline of marriage in our nation is the practice of simply living together without marriage. Sometimes we hear, “Well, it’s just a piece of paper,” and certainly that attitude has contributed to fewer people being married. And then, of course, there is the growth in the divorce rate. Most of us know from personal experience that divorce is a destructive force. We look around us, then, and we understand that marriage as God planned it is facing some serious challenges.

However, I would suggest that as serious as all of these challenges may be, the most serious challenge to the marriage relationship comes not from the outside, but from the inside, from the attitudes of those who are married toward each other. Most of us who are married know that marriage can be difficult. Of course I’m not speaking from personal experience here or anything, but in more of an abstract-anonymous way, most people know that marriage can be a struggle. Maybe we go into it with the best of intentions, but we quickly realize that we are living in the real world—a world of hard work, and bills, and disagreements, and frustrations, and even disappointments. There are real problems that need to be solved.

With this in mind, I would invite you to turn with me to several verses in the Old Testament book of Proverbs as we consider some wisdom from King Solomon concerning how to overcome some of those tense moments that all of us seem to face from time to time in our families. The passage is found in Proverbs 15. As most of us know, Proverbs is rather unusual, because there is basically no context. In other words, most times in the book

of Proverbs, one verse has nothing to do with the verses either before or after it. However, as we look through the book of Proverbs, we do sometimes see little clumps of verses that seem to apply to various circumstances. And yes, they may apply to many different areas, but this morning I would like for us to consider a small section that seems to apply God's wisdom to those struggles that we will occasionally face with our families. Just in this short little section, we read about sadness, we read about having a broken spirit, we read about turmoil, we read about hatred, we read about having a hot temper. In other words, King Solomon is writing about how to behave in a stressful situation. We are talking about a time of tension, and for the purpose of our study this morning, we are talking about a family storm. Have you ever had a family storm? Do you think King Solomon ever had a family storm? We know from the Bible that King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. King Solomon had a thousand women in his life! I'm thinking that King Solomon probably knew something about tension in a family! This morning, then, let us consider some of King Solomon's inspired advice—Proverbs 15:13-23...

- ¹³ ***A joyful heart makes a cheerful face,
But when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken.***
- ¹⁴ ***The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge,
But the mouth of fools feeds on folly.***
- ¹⁵ ***All the days of the afflicted are bad,
But a cheerful heart has a continual feast.***
- ¹⁶ ***Better is a little with the fear of the LORD
Than great treasure and turmoil with it.***
- ¹⁷ ***Better is a dish of vegetables where love is
Than a fattened ox served with hatred.***
- ¹⁸ ***A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
But the slow to anger calms a dispute.***
- ¹⁹ ***The way of the lazy is as a hedge of thorns,
But the path of the upright is a highway.***
- ²⁰ ***A wise son makes a father glad,
But a foolish man despises his mother.***
- ²¹ ***Folly is joy to him who lacks sense,
But a man of understanding walks straight.***
- ²² ***Without consultation, plans are frustrated,
But with many counselors they succeed.***
- ²³ ***A man has joy in an apt answer,
And how delightful is a timely word!***

Again, there are many ways we could apply these verses, but this morning I'd like for us to focus on how these inspired words can give us a path for surviving tension within the family.

I. **And one of the first ideas we discover is that we are to LEARN TO LAUGH.**

Please notice verse 13, "***A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, but when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken.***" Another translation says, "***A cheerful heart brings a smile to your face; a sad heart makes it hard to get through the day.***" And again in verse 15, "***All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.***" Another translation says, "***A miserable heart means a miserable life; a cheerful heart fills the day with song.***" We could skip down to verse 30, "***Bright eyes gladden the heart; Good news puts fat on the bones.***" Or, as one translation says, "***A twinkle in the eye means joy in the heart, and good news makes***

you feel fit as a fiddle.” We could also add Proverbs 17:22, **“A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones.”** Or, as another translation says, **“A cheerful disposition is good for your health; gloom and doom leave you bone-tired.”** If I could summarize here: The home should be a fun and happy place! In fact, a Christian home should be a place where other children from the neighborhood enjoy hanging out. We had some neighbors down in Janesville, a young couple, and I remember them coming outside yelling about the children from the neighborhood making tracks in the snow in their front yard. How sad is that! They didn’t want children to leave any footprints in the fresh snow. What a sad way to live! A Christian, home, though, should be a place where children are welcome. Several days ago, one of our neighbors called Keola and said, “You know, I really feel like I need to start paying you guys child support!” You see, his children seem to be living at our house this summer, and we love having them with us. We love having that relationship. A Christian home should be filled with laughter. A Christian home should be a happy place to live.

Unfortunately, there is often too much tension in the home. Unfortunately, sometimes we suffer from the **“broken spirit”** that Solomon refers to. Dr. Clifford Kuhn of the University of Louisville School of Medicine recently reported that children ages 3-5 laugh on average between 250-300 times a day, and yet adults between the ages of 30-35 average laughing only 15 times a day. As we get older, therefore, perhaps we get more serious, maybe life gets less funny than when we were three years old, and perhaps we miss out on laughter, one of the great blessings that God has given to us.

Doctors and scientists, though, are constantly telling us that it is good to laugh—it lowers blood pressure, increases our resistance to infection, releases endorphins (the body’s natural pain-killers). Studies have proven that there is less absenteeism and more productivity in a work environment where laughter is present. Those who laugh are less likely to have heart disease. Laughter reduces stress. It is scientifically proven, therefore, that being happy is good for us. Bob Hope referred to laughter as “therapy, an instant vacation.” We have had Jess spend the past few days at our house, and this past Friday afternoon as I was doing the research for this lesson, I asked her, “So, do you think we are a happy family?” And she said, “Oh, yeah! And you guys are really weird, too!” I love that! I am thankful to have been raised in a family that loved laughing together. My grandfather always loved a good joke. Sometime you need to ask me to tell you the one about the drunk man on the town square, a joke that he just loved to tell, over and over and over again. Laughter is truly good medicine.

Several months ago, I let our subscription to the local paper lapse to save some money, and I quickly discovered that what I miss most about the newspaper is the comics. So, I have had to go find a source of comics online. We are a happy family, and we enjoy laughing together. As irreverent as it is, I love reading the Onion, even if only for the headlines. And then in the church bulletin, I think you have noticed by now that I love cartoons! Even when it comes to spiritual matters, there is so much to be happy about, there is so much to laugh about! Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “Humor is a divine quality, and God has the greatest sense of humor of all.” Sometime people may think of God as being all-serious, and yet the Bible repeatedly says that we are to come into God’s presence with thanksgiving, gladness, joy, and praise. In other words, always going around looking sad is not necessarily a spiritual quality.

As someone has said, therefore, concerning the family, “Be fair, be firm, be fun.” Before we even need to cope with any difficulties, let’s make sure that we learn to laugh together as a family. In general, the way we treat each other and the underlying attitude we have at home can either lift each other up, or it can drag all of us down. Or, as Solomon said, **“A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, but when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken.”** Let us learn to laugh with our families.

II. There is a second basic concept in this passage, and that is, as we interact with our families we are to LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.

We see this in verse 14, and we also see it in verses 21-23. In verse 14, King Solomon says, *“The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on folly.”* Those other verses talk about *“understanding,” “consultation,”* and *“counselors.”* We get the picture of someone who listens, of someone who pays attention. And when we apply this to the family, we see the wisdom of what Solomon was saying. Too often, parents are too busy to pay attention to their own children. Husbands and wives are often too busy to truly listen to each other.

We need to understand, though, that listening is so important. Several years ago, researchers asked Christian couples about their greatest needs in marriage. They were told to prioritize those needs from 1-5, and wouldn't you know it: “Conversation” was on the list of 73% of those wives who were surveyed. For women, it came up as #3 on the list, and for men it came up as #5 on the list. And right there, don't we see at least a little potential for conflict? Men and women put a slightly different priority on the importance of conversation. Some might be surprised that men even mentioned conversation as one of their greatest needs in marriage, but it was! Even men need somebody to talk to. So we know that conversation is important, but at the same time, we also know that listening is hard work. It is hard to truly focus on what another person is saying. As we listen, too often, we get distracted by our own thoughts, our own problems, our own concerns, and we fail to truly hear what the other person is saying. I don't remember the exact figures, but I remember learning many years ago that the average person speaks around 100 words per minute, but the average person thinks at a rate of around 700 words per minute. That means that you are thinking in circles around the words that I am speaking right now—and that's alright, that's something I need to be aware of while I'm preaching, but let's think about that from a family point of view. Surveys have shown that one of the biggest complaints wives have is that their husbands do not listen. But the important thing is that we as families take time to truly listen to each other—instead of thinking in circles around one another, we need to slow down and let those words sink in. We give each other our full attention. We pay attention to the non-verbals (gestures, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice). We put down the newspaper. We turn off the TV. We wait to plan our response until the other person is finished speaking. We respond in a way that lets the other person know that we understand what has been said. In other words, we listen with both the ears and the heart.

There is a benefit to listening. Down in verses 21-23 is where we find those comments about consultation, understanding, and counselors. Solomon is saying that when we listen, we gain understanding, we learn, we grow, and we end up working on our problems together. I know I've told some of you about this before, but several years ago sometime between after school and bedtime, I started asking our kids, “What interesting thing happened to you today?” You see, when you ask kids, “What did you learn today,” they don't have an answer to that question. Too often, the answer to that question is “Nothing.” But we've learned over the past few years to ask “What interesting thing happened to you today?” and the rule in our family at least is that you must come up with an answer. Maybe you don't think you learned anything, but something interesting happened, something out of the ordinary. I don't know whether that will help in your family, but in ours, at least, it has helped to encourage the kind of listening and communication that Solomon is encouraging here in the book of Proverbs. So, we are to learn to listen.

III. As we continue to think about surviving the storms of family life together there is a third basic concept in Proverbs 15, and that is: WE ARE TO CULTIVATE AND NOURISH A SPIRIT OF CONTENTMENT IN THE FAMILY.

We see this in verses 16-17. Maybe you can try to imagine with me a dad pulling up to a run-down house in an old beat-up Honda Civic. The kids run to meet him at the door. There is spaghetti on the stove, and after a few minutes they all sit down for dinner to eat off of some old mis-matched plates. They thank God for the food, and then they all dig in along with a good discussion of all of the interesting things that happened that day. The house is full of love and laughter. But then on the other hand, imagine a dad who pulls up to the large brick home on a well-manicured lawn in his late model European luxury car, but no one comes to meet him at the door, because all of the kids are in their rooms playing their own X-Boxes on their own big-screen TV's. As they quietly eat their expensive steak dinners on the fine china, dad is deep in thought, preoccupied with the big deal that's going down at work tomorrow. There is hardly any discussion unless it is sarcastic and cutting. Let me ask: Which family would you like to be a part of? Some of you kids might be wondering: What version of X-Box? But that's not the point! The point is: Solomon is making a contrast as he emphasizes how important it is to be content, how important it is to live within our means. Stuff does not necessarily bring happiness!

In verses 16-17, ***“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and turmoil with it. Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred.”*** In other words, having more stuff does not necessarily mean that we will be happy. And in fact, sometimes stuff can make us unhappy. Our possessions can possess us. Several years ago after one of the big blizzards, we went out and got a huge new snowblower. We thought that it would save us some time. However, when we read the instruction manual, the instructions tell us to go through the entire snowblower and tighten every single nut and bolt after every 2-3 hours of operation! So, here is this nice new contraption, but it appears that we will spend the rest of our lives tightening bolts! Truly, our possessions can possess us. As Jesus said in Luke 12:15, ***“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”*** What a powerful reminder! We talked about this this past Wednesday evening, and we reminded each other that the one who borrows money is a slave to the lender. That's in the Bible, that's in Proverbs 22:7. The one who borrows is a slave to the lender, and there is always a downside to slavery. As the old saying goes, “We buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't even like.” And this contributes to stress and tension in the family. Solomon, though, would encourage us to be content.

I would give just a brief word of encouragement to any of you who may go looking to buy a house at any point in the future, and that is: Do not let the bank tell you how much you can afford. I know how tempting it is to push the limit, but there is wisdom in holding back. When we moved to Madison, I remember the banks saying, “You can afford this much house,” and I remember saying, “But we don't WANT to afford that!” In other words, there is wisdom in coming in under the limit. The same goes for cars or just about anything. The world says, “Oh, you can do better than that.” But the Bible says: Be content with what you have. And so when it comes to stressful family situations, let's not make things worse by adding any unnecessary debt and financial strain to the picture.

If we would like some help with contentment, I could suggest something I do from time to time, and that is: Go on a walk, and commit to thanking God for something the whole time you're out there walking. I've never done this with my family, but on my own I can walk for at least half an hour thanking God for something different the whole time. And then at the dinner table, we will often open it up before the prayer: What are we thankful for tonight? And then the one who leads the prayer will include those things in our family prayer. It is hard to always be wanting more if we are constantly thanking God for what we already have. We are to cultivate contentment in the family.

IV. **There is another concept I'd like for us to notice in Proverbs 15, and that is: AS WE NAVIGATE THROUGH A FAMILY STORM, THERE IS A BENEFIT TO ALLEVIATING ANGER.**

"Alleviate" was the only word I could come up with to summarize what Solomon was saying about anger here. The word can be traced back to Latin and literally refers to making something "not heavy." It means, then, that we will lighten anger, we will relieve it. The opposite of alleviate is to increase, strengthen, aggravate, or intensify, and that is NOT what we want to do. And so in verse 18, Solomon says, ***"A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but the slow to anger calms a dispute."*** In a Christian family, we can keep our anger under control. Somebody might say, "Oh, but you don't know my temper." And yet what sometimes happens when the phone rings in the middle of a really intense argument? "Hello!" And so yes, apparently we can control our anger! As Christians, when things get intense, we do not need to take the bait. We do not need to escalate things. As Solomon said back up in verse 1, ***"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."***

As we think about this, let's realize something: Husbands, the one person on this earth who can hurt you the most is your wife. And wives, the one person who can hurt you the most is your husband. That puts a lot of responsibility on each of us. When we get married, we let our guard down, we open ourselves up. So, in light of the tremendous damage that can be done, let's remember what Solomon said here, ***"A gentle answer turns away wrath...."*** Instead of flying off in a rage, let's take a few moments to slow down, let us alleviate the anger, let us make the anger not so heavy. Let us not always insist on getting the last word, unless, of course, the last word is "Yes, dear!" Let us attack and go after the problem and not each other. Let us remember that no issue is more important than our relationship. Let us understand that we will not agree on everything. Some people just get bugged to death unless their spouse accepts their point of view on every issue. But let's remember: If two people were exactly the same in every way, one of them would not be necessary. And then on the other hand, even if we give in a little here and there, let's realize that we still win, because we are protecting the marriage.

And while we're on this, we should probably also remember Paul's words about anger in Ephesians 4:26-27, ***"BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity."*** There are some storms that may take more than one day to resolve, but even then, even though we are having some kind of disagreement, what if we said, "We have this problem, we will work through it, but for tonight, for now, we are okay with each other, and we will not let the sun go down on our anger." It may be difficult, but Solomon would encourage us to alleviate our anger.

Conclusion:

This morning we have looked at a number of inspired proverbs, and we have applied them to our families. And really, our goal this morning has been to apply these inspired verses to ourselves. As we go back home later this afternoon, then, let us pray about our families. Let us ask God for wisdom as we navigate through difficult situations. Let us learn to laugh together as a family. Let us learn to listen. Let us learn to be content, not only as individuals, but as a family. And let us apply what the Bible teaches about anger to the conflicts and disagreements that we have in our family relationships.

We live in a world that does not respect marriage, and yet as Jesus said in our Scripture reading this morning, those who obey His words are like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. The house survives the storm. Let us pray that we will be in that number.

As we close, we would like to give each person here this morning the opportunity to become a Christian. We invite you to just do what the Bible says. We are not interested in being any kind of denomination, but our goal is simply to do what the Bible says to the best of our ability. The Bible teaches that all people must believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, we must turn away from sin, and we must then allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. Baptism is not something we do to show that we have already been saved—that is not in the Bible—but at the point of baptism we reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We are then born into God's family. If you have any questions let us know. If you would like for us to pray about a family situation, write it down and bring it to the front—we'll do that. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, please let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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