

Marriage and Parenting
Topic 11 – Parenting: Blended Families
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Introduction

The hit TV show, “The Brady Bunch”, that aired from 1969-1974, depicts the blended family as a rather simple situation to manage. Reality tells a much different story however. It is the story of potentially frustrating intricacy and complication. Though the complexities of parenting a blended family may seem too difficult to manage biblically, there is hope in God’s Word that surpasses the most difficult of situations. The truth of the Bible has the power to revolutionize the hardships faced in blended families and bring peace, comfort, and restoration in such a way that unbelieving world stands befuddled and intrigued.

Foundationally speaking, every principle that has been shared regarding how to parent to God’s glory in this series on parenting applies just as much in a blended family. That being said, there exist unique difficulties for parents involved in a blended family. To God’s praise and glory, and to the Christian stepparents’ relief, the Bible provides everything we need to sufficiently address these unique difficulties.

Definition of a Blended Family: “a family that includes children from a previous marriage of the wife, husband, or both parents”¹

Unique Difficulties in Blended Families

1. *Bad influences in the “other” home.* Maybe you and your ex-spouse share custody of your child and your ex-spouse has married someone who you do not believe to be a good influence on your child. There could also be other children in your ex-spouse’s home who belong to their new spouse who are not a good example. Maybe the reason your marriage ended in the first place was due to differences in parenting and now you have no way to know exactly what is being done to parent your child when he or she is in your ex-spouse’s care.
2. *Developing relationships and trust with stepchildren with whom you have not spent much time.* You may have married into a family in which the children are in junior high or high school. These children may just think you only care about their mom or dad and not about them. They will most likely have their guard up for a while before they begin to trust you and let you in on their life. Or you may have married into a situation in which the child is old enough to know things are different but not old enough to know exactly what is going on. It can be very difficult to know what kind of words to use to refer to yourself or your spouse’s ex-spouse.
3. *How to participate in the discipline of stepchildren.* You may be left with stepchildren for hours at a time as the only authority for that time. They will want to test the boundaries and manipulate the situation to be able to get away with things they normally are not allowed to do or say. It can be a unique challenge to communicate effectively with your spouse and the ex-spouse about what are the acceptable means of discipline. Even after discussing this topic, you may have some very unreasonable parameters placed on you by your spouse’s ex-spouse. It may also be very

¹ Merriam-Webster online definition from m-w.com

difficult to view and treat your stepchildren with the same love you would for your own child. Disciplining in anger could be a more difficult sin to avoid with your stepchildren consequently.

4. *Encouraging your biological children to love your spouse (i.e., their stepparent).* In this situation, you have to show your support of your spouse by respecting and honoring them in front of your own children. Your children will have questions about their new stepparent, and you will have to think of how to answer those questions in a way that encourages growth in their relationship with your spouse. You may also want to think about how to help your spouse love your children uniquely since he or she does not understand your children like you do.
5. *Blending convictions on how to raise children.* When you officially “blend” your families together, you will have developed convictions on how to raise children and the temptation will be for each of you to raise your own children how each of you see fit. That will create confusion among the children and ongoing conflict between you and your spouse. There may need to be some long conversations about how to blend your parental convictions with your spouse. These long conversations may be followed by “recap” conversations once certain scenarios arise that cause you to question what you had concluded in those previous conversations. This is difficult enough for parents in a traditional or nuclear family. The layers of confusion and complexity compound with blended families.
6. *How to treat a hostile parent of your stepchildren.* You may be in this situation where the biological parent of your stepchildren (i.e., not your spouse) treats you with tremendous hostility and bitterness. They may talk poorly of you while your stepchildren stay with them, and they may intentionally make it difficult for you to coordinate picking up and dropping off the children or be even more belligerent in their maltreatment of you. This could be not due to anything you’ve done. They may just be jealous or bitter...etc.
7. *Honoring and respecting the parent of your stepchildren.* Related to the previous difficulty, the biological parent of your stepchildren (i.e., not your spouse) may not be hostile, but you may find it difficult to speak respectfully of them with your stepchildren. This may be difficult because you are trying very hard to earn your stepchildren’s trust and it can be difficult to not view their love for their biological parent as an obstacle to your goal. You may be an innately competitive person and then the situation turns into a competition of sorts. This would not be considered “healthy competition.”
8. *Communicating with more than just your spouse about logistics of caring for “shared” children.* With blended families with shared custody, it can be very difficult to organize the logistics of who has what kids when and where they will be. You may be working with people who are poor communicators, or you might be a poor communicator and this can cause frustration among those involved.
9. *Being sensitive to your child who now may have several parents in their life.* You may be looking at how your life is now so complicated by this blended family situation, and you may forget that this is more than likely most difficult for the children involved. The parental authorities in their life may have just doubled (it may be even more in more complicated situations). They are confused and desire to be loved and cared for, and you may just be too focused on yourself and how you are going to work through everything yourself.

This list of unique difficulties for blended families could go on, but we should turn now to examining some of the overarching biblical principles we should bear in mind when faced with these (or other) difficulties.

Biblical Principles to Consider

1. *Walk in the Spirit* – ¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. (Gal 5:16)

As has been stated in this series, this is the foundational principle guiding all areas of the Christian life. Before we begin to work on specific areas with difficult circumstances, this needs to be the anchor of our spiritual thinking and conduct. It is the question we should ask ourselves daily. For if we are not yielded in our heart to God's leading and authority over our lives, the changes we make will be superficial and temporary at best.

2. *Be involved in the body of Christ* – ⁴For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Rom 12:4-5)

A child must have the support of the body of Christ. God has designed the church to support itself as each member serves the body as a whole. This needs to be a commitment of the stepparent. As children in a blended family see their believing parents involved and serving in the local church, they will see the body of Christ at work and they will receive much of the support and love needed to develop in their own relationship with the Lord.

3. *Remember that God's Word is sufficient for stepparents as well* – ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17)

Every good work that you need to do as a stepparent can be motivated by and found in God's Word. Blended families are not too complicated for the all-sufficient Word of truth.

4. *Pray for wisdom* – ⁵But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (Jas 1:5)

If you think you are wise enough for any of the trials we face in this life, you need to humble yourself and realize that you need to regularly ask God for wisdom. At the end of the day, what you choose to do to respond to particular situations ought to come from the wisdom that is from above rather than your own self-generated wisdom. A prayer for wisdom should be a frequent habit of any believer and that includes (and may be even more true for) parents of a blended family.

5. *Love even when you are not being loved* – ⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷"If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mat 5:43-48)

Being a stepparent carries with it the higher possibility of not being loved by your children. So much of a child's love (no matter what age) has to do with trust and your faithfulness to be involved in a meaningful way in their life. Even when you do these things perfectly, your love may not be reciprocated.

That is when you will see the Christlikeness of your love. If you become frustrated and stop showing love, then you know your love was not purely motivated. You must remember that Christ loved even when He was not loved, and this was most clearly displayed on the cross. As He was dying, He uttered, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

6. *Consider the interests of others as more important than your own* – ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phl 2:3-8)

Christ, the epitome of humility, showed us what it means to consider others as more important than ourselves. Although He was God, Christ laid down elements of His majesty that He had every right to fully possess so that He could dwell among, and ultimately die for, us.

Unlike parents in a traditional family, those in a blended family have many more people's interests to take into consideration. This does not mean that biblical convictions need to be set aside to acquiesce to someone's demands. It does however mean that as a Christian, we have a higher standard of humility and should stand out as different when given the opportunity to consider other people's opinions.

7. *Look to serve and not be served* – ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mar 10:45)

This exhortation from Christ is in many ways related to the previous biblical principle. There are many people who need to be served in a blended family. Spouse, stepchildren, biological children, relatives on many (not just two in a blended family) sides of the family. If you stand out as the demanding parent/stepparent who is always conniving to have their wishes fulfilled, that does not honor Christ's words or reflect His example of a servant.

8. *Be patient, and don't grow weary of doing what's right* – ⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. ¹⁰So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith. (Gal 6:8-10)

Here, we have a biblical principle that can give us hope to obey the previous two exhortations. There may be years that go by where you are committed to and successfully living out Christ-like behavior as a parent in a blended family. Paul promises the Galatian believers that they will

reap eternal benefits if they did not grow weary in their struggle to do what is right. This needs to be the perspective kept in mind since life's complications can make the "here and now" seem like it is all that matters. Rather, we need to fix our eyes on eternity.

³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:3)

When encountering a hostile parent on the "other side" of the family, the words of Hebrews 12:3 remind us to consider Christ's example. The same phrase "lose heart" appears here and the key to not losing heart is to consider Christ's endurance of the hostility shown Him. None of us have gone through the hostility He experienced, and it is when we consider the magnitude of that hostility that we attain a biblical perspective on our own situation of perceived hostility.

9. *Do not show partiality* – ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (Jas 2:9) ¹¹For there is no partiality with God. (Rom 2:11)

It can be a temptation to treat your own biological children with favoritism or partiality in your blended family. It is easy to become overly defensive of them when your spouse (their stepparent) treats them in a way that you think is harsh or neglectful. This temptation needs to be resisted because it leads to the sin of partiality.

10. *Remember that God works through adverse circumstances* – ²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. (Gen 50:20)

No matter how complicated and out of control the circumstances of your blended family may seem, God is still at work. The Bible contains inspiring examples of how God has been faithful to work out His will even when the sin of mankind seeks to thwart Him. In the account of Joseph's hardships in Genesis 50, God was still working out a magnificent plan. It was Joseph's pride and insensitivity that led to his brothers seeking to kill him but then selling him into slavery in Egypt. It was his brothers' sin that led them to carry out their plan. In the end though, when Joseph and his brothers are reunited, Joseph recognized God's good plan that was worked out through the sin and adversity.

There will be times when it seems as though God is distant and is not working out His good and perfect will in your blended family. However, if God can use murderous hate to bring about His good and perfect will, He can certainly do so in your blended family.

11. *Stepparents are still authorities and should act in that role without abdicating it* – ¹Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. (Rom 13:1)

According to God's sovereignty, stepparents are parents of their stepchildren and need to act as such. All the principles for godly parenting still apply. Stepparents who abdicate this authority are causing more confusion and problems even though they think they are promoting peace.

"Children need parents to exercise legitimate authority over them. Unfortunately, children often see the authority exercised by non-biological parents as illegitimate. When this becomes evident, stepparents are tempted to either bulldoze their way to authority or just leave most of the work to

the biological parent. Either of these options leads to greater stress. Non-biological parents still need to exercise an appropriate measure of authority— but they do need to earn respect, not just demand it. Ask the Lord to give you an extra measure of patience and humility in dealing with stepchildren – especially when you know they have experienced the pain of divorcing parents or the grief of a deceased mom or dad which can cause long-term emotional trauma.”²

12. *Be committed to being unified in your marriage* – Children still need to see that their parents (biological or not) are unified. Children need to see a marriage that honors the Lord and that lines up with what the Bible commands. Refer to earlier topics for a biblical foundation of marriage.

Paul gave the Roman believers a series of commands that stand out as particularly helpful in blended homes where there has been much hurt and distress in relationships.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. (Rom 12:14-18)

Concluding Thoughts

Though blended families present many unique difficulties, God’s Word is sufficient to provide everything to live righteously and honor Him in the midst of those unique difficulties. There are two extremes to which we can lean in how we think about blended families. First, we can be overly simplistic and lack compassion in how we consider the complications of blended families. This can lead to much hurt and bitterness that does not honor God. On the other hand, we can view blended families in a fatalistic or pessimistic way. The danger here is to minimize the power of God’s Word to bring eternal change, restoration, and comfort to the hurt experienced in many blended families.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself: You are a single parent of a 16-year old due to a divorce. You were not a believer when you had the child and since the divorce you have turned your life over to the Lord. Your ex-spouse is a non-believer and has remarried a non-believer. You have been trying to show Christ to your child and they have shown interest in committing their life to the Lord in the past, but recently they have been more resistant. It seems to you that it is due to the negative influence of your child’s stepparent. Upon what biblical principles should you meditate?

Someone Else: Your friend just married someone who has two younger children (ages 5 and 8). They were very excited about the opportunity to be a parent to these children since your friend’s spouse’s ex-spouse is no longer in the picture. However, the children don’t seem to like your friend and your friend is frustrated. What do you share with them?

² Ron L. Deal, "Successfully Blending Families", The Foundry, <http://www.foundrychurch.org>, accessed 12/3/2014.

