



# CONTENTS

Preface: Parenting—An Overwhelming “Calling”	9
Acknowledgments	11
Introduction	13
1. Thou Shalt Build a Functional Family	19
2. Thou Shalt Love Thy Children	39
3. Thou Shalt Model Godliness	57
4. Thou Shalt Teach Thy Children	75
5. Thou Shalt Spend Time with Thy Children	93
6. Thou Shalt Discipline Thy Children	111
7. Thou Shalt Encourage Thy Children	135
8. Thou Shalt Provide Stability and Security for Thy Children	155
9. Thou Shalt Have the Sex Talk with Thy Children	173
10. Thou Shalt Not Be a Passive Parent	193
A Final Word: A Parent’s Proudest Moment	209
Notes	211

# Commandment 1

## THOU SHALT BUILD A FUNCTIONAL FAMILY

For years I have stated my belief that America's number one problem is the breakdown of the family. Whenever I say that, inevitably some offer a different nomination for America's most pressing dilemma. It doesn't take them long, however, to see that at the foundational root of the problem they name is the family meltdown.

In recent years the plight of our families has been described by a relatively new term: *dysfunctional*. With that in mind, let me state again for the record: I believe America's number one problem is the dysfunctional family. And since society's top problem is dysfunctional families, *our highest priority must be to build functional families*.

Building healthy, functioning families ought to be the consuming passion of any people and their culture—not the national defense or the national economy, not foreign affairs or tax reform. The government can't build functional families. In

fact, its policies sometimes stand in the way of developing healthy homes.

*People* build functional families by following the absolute principles God lays out in His Word. That's why this book is called *The 10 Commandments of Parenting*. We will range the Scripture, exploring God's absolutes for building wholesome, happy, functional families. We'll see that William Bennett is right when he calls the family "the fundamental unit of civilization."<sup>1</sup>

### FROM OZZIE AND HARRIET TO OZZY OSBOURNE

Since the advent of television, there have been widely varying depictions of the family. We've had Ozzie and Harriet, Lucy and Ricky, Beaver Cleaver and his household, Andy, Opie, and Aunt Bee, the Brady Bunch, Sanford and Son, the Huxtables, and many others.

Most of these families focused on functionality and treated today's dysfunctional lifestyles as exceptions. But in recent times, family dysfunction is actually celebrated. The popularity of "The Osbournes" indicates the new twist in pop culture. The hit cable TV program features the family of Ozzy Osbourne, who is described by one writer as "an aging, tattooed, drug-battered monster of rock morph." At one time it was alleged that Ozzy was a devil worshiper.<sup>2</sup> Twelve cameras stationed throughout the Osbourne home catch the daily routine of a family that is anything but routine.

As bizarre as life may seem in Ozzy's household, Los Angeles family therapist Jessica Simmonds found, in some ways, the Osbournes "live a very normal life in this upper-middle-class environment, mixed with a really strange mentality and dysfunction." Simmonds sees a home with a "domineering mother" and a "feeble father." Such are major factors in the equation of dysfunction, and so, says Simmonds, "it's not all

funny. . . There's a lot of sadness here."<sup>3</sup> As there is in dysfunctional families everywhere.

## **DYSFUNCTION IS DANGEROUS**

A while back I asked someone what "dysfunctional" meant. "It means nonfunctioning," the person replied. That would seem the obvious meaning, but it's not the precise definition. The prefix *dys* actually means "dangerous." A dysfunctional family, then, by definition, is one functioning "dangerously." Dangerous for whom?

### **Dangerous for the Children**

One study found that children of divorced parents have behavior problems, find it more difficult to adjust, and make lower grades. They also have a higher dropout rate from school and a higher rate of pregnancy out of wedlock.<sup>4</sup>

Columnist Vox Day told of watching MTV videos while working out at his exercise club. There were two different rock bands whose music focused on the impact broken families had on children. Decades ago such songs would not have found such "resonance in the culture," Day wrote. But now, "the terrible costs of divorce linger on, not only in the lives of the divorcing parties but also the lives of the children and the lives of those with whom the children become emotionally involved." Day noted a 1993 study in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, which found a 260 to 340 percent greater likelihood of kids from broken families needing psychological help than those from healthy families.<sup>5</sup>

### **Dangerous for Husbands and Wives**

As family dysfunction has increased, so has domestic violence. Many police officers attend our church. Without exception, the ones I've spoken with will verify that the most frightening, complex, and challenging assignments they have

are those involving family fights. Passions run high, fuses are short, and triggers are easily pulled. But it doesn't stop there. Family dysfunction is dangerous for the mental and emotional health of the men and women involved.

Tracy was a beautiful woman in her early forties when she sought help. She was a committed Christian who had been divorced for several years and was raising two children alone. She described her wonderful childhood in a positive, nurturing home. When she grew up she married her "dream husband." But a year into the marriage, her dream husband had become her worst nightmare. He was abusing her physically and emotionally, while having numerous affairs.

She divorced him and later married another man. This one was an alcoholic and drug addict. Desperate to protect her children, she left him. By the time Tracy sought help, the woman who had entered her first marriage with such confidence and joyful anticipation was a trembling human being who doubted her own self-worth and who bore scars in her body evidencing the dangerous places and people with whom she had lived.

### **Dangerous for Society**

Dysfunction is also dangerous for society as a whole. Almost half the people arrested in America in 1999 were under age twenty-five. Between 1965 and 1998, as families imploded, the nation's juvenile crime rate soared at a 175 percent rate.<sup>6</sup> If the family is indeed civilization's fundamental unit, then *each time a family falls into dysfunction there is a threat to a nation's well-being.*

### **"FORMULA" FOR A FUNCTIONAL FAMILY**

In western nations especially, there seems to be a simple formula for building functional families:  $N + E + P = FF$ . The assumption is that when physical and material *needs* ( $N$ ) are

met from cradle to grave, and people have a good *education* (*E*) along with ample opportunities for basic *pleasures* (*P*) such as travel, recreation, and entertainment, the result will be a *functional family* (*FF*). But the record of affluent society proves that this formula doesn't compute.

The real equation for a functional family is  $C + BP - CU = FF$ . That is, *Christ* (*C*) plus *biblical principles* (*BP*) minus the *curse* (*CU*) produces a *functional family* (*FF*).

So let's do the "math." In the following chapters we'll go into detail about the importance of Christ and biblical principles in building healthy homes. But first we will look at the beginning in the Garden of Eden—God's perfect plan with the world's first family, Adam and Eve, and the appearance of the deadly problem of . . . *the curse*.

### GOD'S PERFECT PLAN

The book of Genesis is foundational. To understand the family, we have to begin with the first family. Prior to their disobedience and the resulting fall of humanity into sin, the Eden family formed a perfect triangle of fellowship among God, Adam, and Eve. Children would have followed naturally in the perfect world because multiplying and scattering were in God's original plan for the beings He had created in His image (see Genesis 1:27–28).

In the Garden of Eden, the first family functioned in four beautiful unities: (1) the unity between God and Adam and Eve, which led to (2) personal unity of each individual with his or her own personality, (3) unity between the two human beings, and (4) unity between people and nature. The unity with God was foundational for all the other unities. The result of all this was positive, wholesome behavior; peace; and joy through God's Spirit.

## THE “ALIEN” ENTERS

One day a being alien to this happy family entered Eden. “Do you want to be like God?” the Evil One asked. The two human beings fell for his con. They decided to trade dependence and fellowship with God for the enthronement of self. Adam and Eve moved from dependence on God to self-control and self-rule. The unity with God was broken, evil came in, and the ingredients of dysfunction penetrated the world. *The curse began.*

In 2002, many Americans were stunned when a drifter broke into the blissful home of a Utah family and snatched Ed and Lois Smart’s older daughter. For nine months, the family and surrounding community searched for Elizabeth Smart. Finally, and thankfully, she was found and her kidnappers arrested. The vagrant who broke into the Smart home was an alien—a stranger who had no business there.

The suspect had worked one time for the Smart family as a handyman. Later, people were shocked to learn the child had probably been brainwashed to the extent she seemed at times to go along with her kidnappers.

This contemporary episode illustrates what happened in Eden. The Evil One was an intruder in the garden who shattered his way into the hearts of Adam and Eve, stealing them from the One who was the basis for their family relationship, and bringing them into a willful choice of the curse.

## FAMILY DYSFUNCTION FROM BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

### A Broken Relationship with God

The curse continues to impact families today, having many negative effects. First, as fellowship with God is broken, people try to hide from Him. Adam and Eve had once yearned for time with God, just like loving family members who will

do almost anything, pay any price, go any distance to be together. But when the curse came, Adam and Eve ran and hid from the One for whose presence they had previously hungered.

Today, we still see human beings trying to hide from God. I've heard all sorts of excuses from people as to why they don't attend church. One man actually told a friend of mine he couldn't join him at church because Sunday was the only day he had to go to his property out in the country and visit his pigs. Now, I've never spent a day visiting pigs. Maybe it's more fun than it sounds. That's only one of the hundreds of excuses I've heard through the years. But actually, the biggest reason people stay away from church is they are just like Adam and Eve—hiding from God. They don't want to know God and they don't want Him to know them. Why? Because they don't want to surrender control of their lives to God.

*The foundation of a functional family is a relationship with God, through which He controls the home. When that core relationship is broken, dysfunction can enter.*

### **A Broken Relationship with Ourselves**

Another effect of the curse contributing to family dysfunction is the change it brings in our relationship to ourselves. Let's look at a couple of psychological terms. *Psychotics* are people who see others as the problem; *neurotics* are those who see themselves as the problem. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve had a healthy self-perception. After the Fall, however, we see Adam as both psychotic and neurotic. His psychosis is revealed in his attempt to blame Eve, and his neurosis is revealed in his personal shame.

So many of our families are made up of people who are either psychotic or neurotic, or both. Now we all know how to play the blame game, which in turn sparks family feuds, fusses, and fights. Or we try to hide by filling our personal lives



with all sorts of distractions. But none of this covers the pain and emptiness we feel inside. We realize we are living in rebellion against God, and that brings shame and feelings of guilt.

Take the case of Carrie. She and her husband, Jack, a wealthy business owner, had a rebellious son. One day Carrie began to understand how some of her own ungodly behaviors and attitudes were being imitated by her son. (Sometimes, guilt is real and not a neurotic fantasy.) But rather than dealing with her sin and her son, Carrie ran—not in a literal sense but certainly in a practical one. She gave all her time and energy to becoming her community's greatest teacher of arts and crafts. She conducted seminars and enjoyed the acclaim of women who sat at her feet and learned the hobby she had mastered. She was never home, so her relationship with her son and husband began to crumble. But Carrie wasn't running from her husband and son. Because of the shame she felt, she was running from God . . . until one horrible day when Carrie came home to find her son had committed suicide.

### **A Broken Relationship with Others**

A third effect of the curse on families today is the breaking of our relationships with others. Initially, Adam and Eve enjoyed a harmonious relationship. But after the Fall, the first thing we see is the psychotic behavior of blame. When God confronted Adam, he blamed Eve. When God turned to Eve, she blamed the serpent. And both of them had the audacity to try to blame God.

Much of the dysfunction in Jack and Carrie's home was in blaming one another for their son's behavior. Later, it became evident he killed himself partly because he blamed himself for the inability of his mother and father to get along. Yes, the curse disrupts our relationship with others.

## A GALAXY OF DYSFUNCTION

None of this is new. Survey the constellation of Old Testament patriarchs, from Abraham to Jacob, and you find an array of dysfunctional families. The patriarchs and their progeny show that the curse expresses itself in different ways in different families, and is passed on from generation to generation. In some families, the curse showed up as physical abuse; in others, emotional torment; in yet others, alcoholism and drug addiction. The curse recycled in the children until one generation finally rose up and cried, “Enough!” That generation repented and turned to God, and the curse was broken from the family line, unless a subsequent generation rebelled against the Lord.

### **Dysfunction Intensifies**

This is the point of what God showed Moses in Exodus 34. God spoke to Moses in a vision: “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (verse 6). It was sweet music on Moses’ ears to know the core nature of God is compassion, grace, slowness to get angry, and overflowing love and kindness. Who wouldn’t want a God like that?

In the vision, God continued by revealing He “keeps lovingkindness for thousands, . . . forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (verse 7). So far, everyone would applaud this gracious God who allows people to do their “own thing.” But then comes another insight into God’s ways. God tells Moses that despite His loving-kindness and graciousness, “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations” (verse 7).

Humans, with their God-given freedom, choose the curse, and God, who honors human freedom, allows it to go forward, though He constantly warns of its effects and calls people to

repentance. This mounting pile of consequences from the curse means family dysfunction intensifies. The hurting people wonder if the curse can be broken and the cycle halted.

### Canceling the Curse

Clearly, the first element in building a functional family is to cancel the curse. When we indicate Christ plus biblical principles minus the curse equals a functional family ( $C + BP - CU = FF$ ), we're suggesting the impact of the curse can be canceled. We do this by (1) confessing our personal and family sins, (2) turning away from the sin that is the effect of the curse, and (3) turning to God through Christ. Because God *is* full of loving-kindness and graciousness, He receives and forgives us even when we are crying out because we are face-to-face with the disastrous consequences of our dysfunction.

Perhaps as you read these words you are realizing you need to declare, "The cycle ends right here!"

Eventually Jacob did just that. One of the "stars" in the patriarchal constellation, Jacob had three great encounters with God. The first was at Bethel, which means "house of God." Ironically, he was there under a ruse. Jacob had left his parents ostensibly to find a wife, but actually he was running away from his brother, Esau, whom he had tricked. Night fell, and young Jacob was far from home and scared. In his desperation, he prayed. As he did, a vision unfolded, and he saw a stairway to heaven, with angels going up and down, symbolizing Jacob's prayers going up and God's response coming down. Though Jacob had been a con artist and scoundrel all his life, God said:

"Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you, and

will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Genesis 28:14–15)

## **When Blessing and Curse Collide**

The blessing of God is the precise opposite, the antithesis, of the curse from the devil. Scientists tell us that when matter and antimatter collide, cataclysmic destruction occurs. When the blessing of God smacks into the curse of the Evil One, the curse is destroyed!

But Jacob didn’t deserve God’s blessing—and neither do we. However, God is gracious and merciful, and when we return to Him, even with impure motives, He will hear us and break the curse of dysfunction from our families. Now, rather than mounting curses, we enter the buildup of blessing.

Jacob’s second great experience with God was near a place he named Mahanaim. As he neared the Jordan River, Jacob remembered Esau had vowed to kill him, so he decided to check his brother’s mood before he took another step. He sent scouts ahead, and after what must have been a nail-biting time for Jacob, they returned with a chilling message: “Esau is coming after you with four hundred thugs!” (Genesis 32:6, paraphrase).

Jacob was terrified. Again he sought God in prayer, asking for favor with his brother. But Jacob, wheeler and dealer that he was, decided to hedge his bet and buy off his brother. So he sent lavish gifts ahead to Esau. In the meantime, he plotted a survival strategy in case prayer and bribery didn’t work. He divided his family and flocks into two separate groups, figuring if Esau attacked the first group, the second would get away, and Jacob would at least have something left. He sent everyone across the River Jabbok, but he stayed behind.

Now Jacob was alone again, as he was that night twenty years earlier at Bethel. His back was against the wall. He

couldn't go backward or forward, so he went to his knees. Like many people suddenly in a dark alley alone with the monstrous consequences of their dysfunction, Jacob learned to pray on the fast track. Often people scoff at this kind of desperate, "foxhole" praying. God doesn't. He knows "our frame" and that we are "dust," understanding better than we our limitations and shortcomings (Psalm 103:14). If God didn't hear prayers of desperation, not many of us would be saved.

### **A Supernatural "Smackdown"**

While Jacob prayed, he experienced what theologians call a "theophany," or an appearance of God in some particular form, such as an angel. Suddenly Jacob felt a rugged, muscular hand on his shoulder. The ground became an arena for a supernatural "smackdown" as this being wrestled Jacob to the ground. The prize from this bout would be nothing less than control of Jacob's life. God wrestled Jacob because God wanted Jacob to give his life completely over to His control. This was round 2—or 2,000 or 2 million—of the same match that began in the garden when Adam and Eve found themselves a tag team going up against God. Smooth, suave, debonair Jacob had skated through life on the wheels of his own skill, craftiness, intellect, charm, and chicanery, doing his own thing, controlling his own destiny. But that brought only dysfunction to his life and everything he touched. Now he is on the ground, struggling with who knows what.

The angel squeezes Jacob, and out come the components of dysfunction—ego, pride, self-sufficiency, vanity, falseness, hypocrisy, and greed. Yet Jacob doesn't want to give in. He wants to retain control. Finally, Jacob feels a sharp pain in his thigh as his opponent dislocates his hip.

As dawn breaks, Jacob's Wrestler knows it's time to relent, but Jacob is hanging on with clawing persistence. Jacob agrees to let his opponent go if the supernatural Wrestler will

bless him. “Your name shall no longer be Jacob [Cheater],” says the powerful Being, “but Israel [one who strives with God]” (Genesis 32:26–28). Jacob is left with lameness so he will always remember his dependence on God. Now, with the Lord’s help, Jacob is ready to end the cycle of his dysfunction.

The next day, Jacob sees Esau closing in with his four hundred men. Jacob—Israel—musters all the courage he can and limps out to meet Esau.

Esau runs toward Jacob, embraces him with a kiss, and they both weep (Genesis 33:4). Because Jacob surrenders control to God, God brings healing in the broken relationship.

### IMPORTANT LESSONS

There are many important lessons here for building functional families. Years earlier, at Bethel, Jacob had made an initial decision to give God control, but he had not followed through. For many of us, there is a point of beginning with God, but we fail to walk in the reality of our commitment, and the old ways return. Jesus said a person who had been freed of a demon but puts nothing in the place the demon had occupied and controlled, would find himself later in a worse state than the original (Matthew 12:43–45). So a profound lesson for families seeking to be healed of dysfunction is the importance of *putting into practice* the advantages of a relationship with God.

#### Accepting Our Weakness

In building functional families, one of the greatest things we can do is revel in our lameness! The devil will always try to convince us we are not capable of raising healthy families, that we are too sinful, inadequate, and stupid. Popular culture will sing Satan’s song to us, telling us we need experts, a “village,” or some other add-on to build a functional family. Jesus

says we are to agree with our “adversary quickly” (Matthew 5:25 KJV). So we should acknowledge that we, alone, are not up to the job of building functional families. But our “lameness”—our weakness—is actually our strength, for then we depend on God for every step.

Remember, God has said that if we would acknowledge Him in all our ways, and lean on Him rather than our own understanding, He would direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5–6). That means, as we’ll see in this book, following His revealed principles to build strong, healthy households.

### **Seeing Our Struggles as Opportunities**

Another important lesson about building functional families is that we must begin to see struggles as opportunities for blessing. God loves us enough to “wrestle” with us. Those He loves, He disciplines (Hebrews 12:6). To Jacob’s credit, rather than crying out against his opponent or being bitter about his struggle, he asks the divine Wrestler to bless him. God’s way in the life of those who turn to Him is to use adversity to strengthen and bless. Jacob gets the point, and so must we if we are going to build functional families.

## **FROM DYSFUNCTION TO HEALTHY FUNCTIONALITY**

The healing of Jacob’s relationship with his brother, Esau, had an impact on his children and reveals the shift from dysfunction to healthy functionality in their family. This brings us to Jacob’s third great experience with God. This one took place in Egypt when he was an old man.

Jacob had a tent full of sons. One of these sons, Joseph, was his favorite—and it showed. Now you would think Jacob would have known better since it was his father’s favoritism that played such a big role in his own painful relationship with

his brother, Esau. Nonetheless, Jacob continued to heap parental accolades and approval onto Joseph.

Joseph's gloating attitude did not help matters either. He had special dreams that he bragged about to his brothers—one of which had his brothers bowing to him as their ruler! During this period of family dysfunction in Jacob's household, the jealousy and resentment of his sons toward the favored Joseph grew daily.

Finally, the sibling rivalry reached a boiling point, and Jacob's sons plotted to get rid of their bratty, arrogant little brother. So they sold Joseph into slavery to a caravan of Ismaelites and told Jacob that a wild beast had devoured his beloved son.

Joseph's relationship with God became stronger during his slavery. It was this strong relationship that would not only bring healing to his broken family but also save them from starvation.

Joseph's story in Egypt started off great. Sold to a nobleman named Potiphar, who was captain of Pharaoh's guard, Joseph quickly found favor with Potiphar and was put in charge of the entire household.

Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife was an immoral woman who falsely accused Joseph of rape. So he was imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. After at least two years of prison, Joseph was released through supernatural intervention. Pharaoh had asked Joseph to interpret a disturbing dream he was having. With God's help, Joseph was able to do it, and Pharaoh was so pleased he promoted Joseph to prime minister, the second most powerful position in Egypt.

Meanwhile, back home in Canaan, a terrible famine swept the land. So Jacob sent his sons down to Egypt where he had heard there was sufficient food. When they arrived, Jacob's sons had to plead for food before—you guessed it—the prime



minister! Many years had passed, so they did not recognize their long-lost brother.

Now if I'm Joseph, I'm thinking, "It's payback time!" But not Joseph; he refused to take on the victim role and instead assumed the task of healer.

Joseph took responsibility for his own life and knew his brothers must take the same responsibility for theirs. So he decided to take action to bring them to repentance. The struggles he had experienced in Egypt were the very dynamics that had established him in a deep relationship with God. Joseph didn't want his brothers to have to go to the depths to which he himself had plunged, but he did want them to have opportunity to know God as he did.

So Joseph first falsely accused his brothers of stealing, as he had been accused falsely. Second, he had them thrown in jail, as he had been. Finally, he sent all his brothers back to Canaan, except for Simeon, knowing this would guarantee their return. Joseph told them to bring Benjamin, the youngest brother, when they came back to Egypt (see Genesis 42:8–26).

On their return home, Joseph's brothers told their father, Jacob, all that had happened. Reluctantly, Jacob allowed his sons to return to Egypt with Benjamin. Once there, Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers. Immediately, there was repentance and healing in that dysfunctional family (see Genesis 42:27–45:15). Joseph became the person in his generation who broke the curse-cycle from his family.

### A VITAL PRINCIPLE

Some may judge Joseph harshly for his treatment of his brothers. But Joseph's own suffering had shown him a vital principle at the heart of healing dysfunction: If the curse is to be healed, there must be confession and genuine repentance before there can be forgiveness and restoration.

This is one of the hardest lessons in moving family mem-

bers from dysfunction to function. *Sometimes people have to be allowed to experience the full brunt of their dysfunctional behavior before there's any hope of healing.* Joseph knew this and was patient enough not to rush the process.

After the reunion in Egypt, Joseph sent his brothers home to Canaan to get Jacob and the whole family. When the brothers reported to Jacob, they confessed they had sold Joseph into slavery. Jacob had long grieved for his son, and now his sorrow could heal. The brothers too, forgiven, restored, and rid of the guilt they had carried for years, could enter the healing process. Jacob and his kids started looking like a family again.

### THE GREAT HEALER

Joseph points us to the great Healer, Jesus Christ. As Joseph was the key to breaking the curse of dysfunction in his family, Jesus Christ has the power to shatter the curse in every person who comes to Him. This is because Jesus, on the cross, became the very embodiment of the curse on each of us from the very time of Adam (Galatians 3:13). For every person who freely and willingly receives Christ, the curse is displaced by the blessing of God. But to get the benefit of this removal of the curse, we must remember the mistake of Jacob. At Bethel, he received God's blessing, but didn't act upon it until twenty years later, when he yielded himself afresh to God at Mahanaim. So, having received Christ and the blessing of God that displaces the curse, we must behave in a way that is consistent with our identity in Christ if we are to enjoy the fruit of functionality.

Jacob became "Limping Israel," beginning a process that enabled his son Joseph to *run*. The curse was broken. When we say "enough" to dysfunction, we—and our entire family—can understand the words of the great old hymn: "He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free."<sup>7</sup>

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QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS

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1. What are symptoms of dysfunction in your family you need to deal with as a parent?
2. Apply the “formula”—*C (Christ) + BP (Biblical Principles) – CU (The Curse) = FF (Functional Family)*—to your family life, and answer these questions:
  - Have we as parents committed ourselves and our home to Christ?
  - Are we as parents growing in our understanding and application of biblical principles in parenting?
  - Are we as parents identifying and repenting of the effects of the curse in our own lives?