

Love Big (Week 3) - Loving Your Church Family - Summary

One of the chief catalysts for the growth of the earliest church was their greatly-expanded definition of family (see 1st Thes. 4.9-10, 1st Peter 1.22, and Romans 12.10, for example). It was no longer confined to those related to you by blood, nor to those of your own kind (be it Roman or Jew). Plus, for many church was the only family they had (i.e., for many slaves).



Here's New Testament scholar N. T. Wright describes this: "The early Christians did their best to live as an extended family... They called each other brother and sister and really meant it. They lived and prayed and thought like that: children of the same father, God Almighty, following the same older brother, Jesus, sharing goods and resources where need arose. When they talked about "love," that's the main thing they meant: living as a single family, a mutually supporting community. The church must never forget that calling."

So if church is family, and if KirkWood is a family, how can we be a healthy, thriving one? To answer that, let's pivot and switch disciplines. Below are the 8 of the 10 markers identified by the American Psychological Association for functional vs. dysfunctional families. Licensed marriage and family therapists everywhere use these criteria to diagnose what may be going wrong in a family system. Just, of course, we can apply it to functioning well as a church family too:

- 1) Clear vs. poor communication: In a dysfunctional family, there is indirect communication (talking to others about others, instead of directly to the person), there's highly emotional language (like anger), and there's poor listening.
- 2) Individuality vs. comparison with other family members: In a dysfunctional family, the clear message is, "Why can't you be more like so and so?" In a healthy family, the commitment is: "I won't expect you to be me, so please don't expect me to be you."
- 3) Shared power vs. power struggles: In an unhealthy home, there is a vying for authority, defined by "winning and losing" and trying to recruit others to your side.
- 4) Purposeful encouragement vs. excessive criticism: Because human adults tend to use more negative verbiage than positive as a default (50% negative, 30% positive, and 20% neutral, to be specific), in a healthy family there is a deliberate, conscious choice to steer toward constructive, not destructive, language. (See Eph. 4.29 here.)
- 5) Predictable character vs. unpredictable encounters: In a dysfunctional family, you never really know who someone will be from encounter to encounter. This can include putting conditions on love and good behavior.

6) Personal responsibility vs. emotional codependency: In a healthy home, I am responsible for my wellbeing, no one else. I take responsibility for my own happiness and/or negative emotions, and I put in place whatever boundaries I might need to. In an unhealthy family, members shift the blame and responsibility to others.

7) Appropriate expectations vs. unrealistic expectations: In a dysfunctional home, there are intense demands placed on you. When you don't meet those expectations, you could be made to feel guilty, criticized, and even punished. This can lead to a negative self-image and feelings of worthlessness.

8) Emotional intimacy vs. emotional superficiality, withdrawal, and hiddenness: In a healthy family, members can connect soul to soul, and are secure enough to be vulnerable with each other. There is mutual trust. In a dysfunctional family, there may be a lot of shared activity, but little deep connection."

Loving Your Church Family - Personal Practices

For those who attended in person worship yesterday, you already have two ways to "love your church family" this week - you've got the Love Big notecards to send to encourage others, and you've got the names of 1-2 family units who attend KW to pray for all week.

Here are a couple things you can do this week:

1. Daily pray over the eight traits of a healthy family listed above. Pray them for the KW church family, and for your own place in it.

2. The majority of the traits of a healthy family above can be acted upon, not merely thought or prayed about. So this week, see if you can do each of the following at least once:

- If applicable, engage in a direct, even-keeled conversation with someone about a decision that needs to be made (#1 above). Likewise, invite someone else into a win-win conversation about that decision to be made (#3 above).

- Go out of your way to thank someone else in the KirkWood family for the ways that they're not you, and for how you've benefited from those differences (#2 above).

- In writing or verbally, be constructive or encouraging to someone at KW (#4).

- Circling back to a theme from the first week of "Love Big," doing something this week that helps you take personal responsibility for your own wellbeing (#6 above).

- Spend time with someone at KW that you trust, and purpose to be open with them connecting with them below the surface level, soul to soul (#8 above).

3. Read this article, cited at the end of the sermon yesterday, by Michael Frost (who wrote "Surprised by Joy," which we read together as a church last summer) on churches sometimes being a "lonely crowd" and not family: [The Lonely Crowd: churches dying due to friendlessness](#)