

COMING HOME, PART 3: NEW FAMILY ENDOWMENT

John 14:12-15; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; Romans 13:7-13 (NASB)

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One of the opening scenes of the 2004 film *Secondhand Lions* shows a smartly dressed mom driving her preteen son down the road in a big old 1960's sedan with huge tail fins. They are on their way to the Texas ranch of two great-uncles who have been out of the country and missing for forty years. The mom, brilliantly played by Kyra Sedgwick, is giving her doubtful-looking son, Walter, an impassioned speech about him spending the summer at his great-uncles' house and how much he will like it. It is plain that he does not want to go, and says so.

The mom then reveals the real purpose of his visit. Rumor has it that the two crazy old uncles are fabulously rich even though they live in an unpainted farmhouse with a rusted tin roof. She is hoping that they will take a shine to their grandnephew, and when they kick the bucket, they will feel kindly toward him and leave him all of their alleged money. In reality, she is simply abandoning him.

It becomes clear that this vulnerable young fellow has been neglected throughout his life. He has no father, and his mother has refused to make the investments in his life which every child needs to grow into a mature person. Morally, this mom had left her son adrift, since her only personal guidance to him seems to have been based on her emotional need to get what she wants. Her parental narcissism has left her child bereft of the family endowment upon which a growing child can establish a productive life, and without a moral universe. If Walter were left in this condition his prospects would have been poor, to say the least. [Let me warn that this PG-rated film is filled with mild expletives which should have been deleted.]

A recent report on violence in America reveals a strong correlation between the breakdown of the family and terrible outcomes for children. When the love, encouragement, guidance, and financial resources of the family are missing from children's lives, they get their launch in life with a terrible collection of deficits. They don't have a lot to build on, and they have little guidance about how to live a normal life. Many have trouble finishing school, and little moral strength to resist the pull of crime. With little family empowerment or moral authority learned at home, many such children end up as troubled adults.

A NEW FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

From God the Father's point of view, we are all like Walter. Spiritually, we are all kids on track to a terrible outcome in life unless some investment is made in our lives. The story of Adam and Eve being ejected from the Garden of Eden is our story. Since that time every human being has been trying to build a life without the resources God intended for his children.

As we have learned in previous studies in the fourteenth chapter of John, God the Father has a plan to fix our problem. He invites us, through faith in Christ, to come home to him, to embark on a new way to live through the wreckage of this lost world. He offers us a restored relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus said: "**Do not let your heart be troubled;**

believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:1-2). Our new family connection with our heavenly Father through faith in Christ is what makes his house a home.

In the human sense we each have received a greater or lesser family endowment upon which to build our lives. We may have been born rich or poor or in between. We may have had two parents, one, or none. Our parents may have encouraged our education or not. They may have taught us right from wrong, or they may have schooled us in immorality. Yet every positive thing we were given through no credit of our own was something we did not have to overcome. These positive resources, taken together, are our family endowment.

The first part of our new endowment is the empowerment Christ gives to everyone who becomes a child of God by believing in him: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it"** (John 14:12-14). Our family endowment in Christ includes the ability to do deeds like those he did while here on the earth. The promise is not that we will do every miracle Christ did or that all of us will do these things, but that divine manifestations would be normal for members of his church. Next Christ promises that believers in him would do greater works than he did! This would be absurd if only viewed from the standpoint of miraculous sign gifts. What could be greater than recalling the dead back to life or calming a tempestuous storm?

I am indebted to commentator R.C.H. Lenski for his explanation of the greater works. He argues that Christ was comparing miraculous works he did by brute divine power with the works achieved by the church through the application of God's grace. Leading lost people to life in Christ, carrying the gospel to every nation on earth, and bringing total life change in people's lives by the grace of God are greater works in Jesus' mind than the miracles! Lenski argued very cogently that the great works refer to material and temporary miracles and deliverances, while the greater works deal with the spiritual and eternal. And the amazing thing is that when Christ was exalted to the right hand of the Father he left it to his church to do these greater works.

Through the agency of prayer we will do these greater works, as he said: **"Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do..."** At first our hearts flip with excitement at the thought of being able to do anything at all by prayer, but we soon learn by experience that the gracious power of Christ moves through us in a very carefully directed way. The first guide to this seemingly unlimited power of prayer is that every prayer God will answer must be in Jesus' name. The name of Christ, in Hebrew thought, encompasses all of his character and attributes as he revealed himself in time and space. We must be asking for something Jesus would have done in the way he would have done it.

This first requirement for wielding the power of God through prayer seems fairly easy to fulfill. As long as we are praying for things in the purposes of Christ we are OK. But a more stringent requirement is given second, namely that we pray for things **"so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."** There is a sense in which we glorify God by our words and actions, but when it comes to the direct release of his power through us God is the only one who can glorify himself. He only does things which accord with plans and purposes of which we are only dimly aware.

And there is no fooling him. When the woman with the hemorrhage reached out to touch the hem of his garment through the crowd and was healed, Christ was not taken unawares. When he wheeled around to ask: "Who touched me?" in a crowd which was bumping up against him, he was calling forth the public faith of the woman who had totally trusted him in the privacy of her heart. So we must receive this aspect of our new family empowerment in Christ with the acknowledgment that while we will do works like Christ and even greater, God alone knows when and how he will do these things to glorify himself through us.

The new family empowerment we receive as members of the Fathers' house is a mammoth subject, but there are three key areas I want to highlight. Paul wrote this to the believers in Ephesus: **"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe"** (Ephesians 1:18-19a). The personal knowledge of God is the sweetest and best thing we receive by faith, and it will take an eternity to explore. May God guide you into this best kind of wealth, far surpassing anything provided by well-to-do earthly parents, namely, **"the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints."** Taste them, savor them, and let them be the food for your soul.

Secondly, I would direct our attention to the spiritual gifts we receive in our family empowerment as members of the Father's house. Paul wrote about some of them to the Corinthians in this way: **"For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills"** (1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

Kids gain from skills and abilities which their parents build into them. These may range from good health habits to professional-level training. Our heavenly Father, by contrast, makes unbelievable abilities possible for any true believer in Christ. He may give us the capacity to speak guidance about God's will through wisdom, he may give an endowment in the knowledge of God, he may give a special gift of faith to overcome life challenges, he may use us to do healings, miracles, to prophesy, to discern good from bad spirits at work in people, to speak other languages, or to interpret other languages. This is only a partial list, but you can see immediately that we have gone far beyond a family empowerment which makes us good spellers, whizzbangs in the garden, or wise investors. We thank God for all such earthly things, but let us understand the privilege and power of our new family in Christ.

A third aspect of our family empowerment, and not the last, is the gift of spiritual fruit, as Paul explained to the Galatians: **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law"** (Galatians 5:22-23). We all come equipped by our families with a list of character traits, some of which are good and some are bad. But in the new family we enter by faith in Christ we take on the familial character traits of God himself. Joy and goodness, while we may taste them, are not the normal traits of the fallen human nature. If we pay attention, we will see just how marvelous the fruit of the Spirit are against the backdrop of a lost humanity.

The moment you enter the Father's house by faith your entire reality and future changes! Your human resources are no longer the definition of who you are or what you can do. Learning to live in our new family empowerment is one of the great adventures of the Christian life.

NEW HOUSE RULES

A second major area of the Father's endowment for the believer is to set rules for his house which tell us how to be. Houses which are homes have house rules about how to behave. These rules define what is in bounds and what is out of bounds, but they also point the way to the development of character. And let us never be confused in thinking that character is simply a matter of matching the pattern of our lives to an external pattern of morality. Character is developed by the formation of an inward set of desires and motives which produce the pattern which is then expressed through a person's words and actions.

Jesus Christ gave a simple yet unthinkably profound word about this which is recorded in John 14: **"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"** (John 14:15). Here we see the motive of love for Christ which produces a pattern of life. Life in the Father's house is guided both by new house rules but also a refined motive for following them. Love and obedience are forever linked in God's house. It is simply not possible to have one without the other and still be a Christian. About our manner of speech, for example, Christ said: **"For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart"** (Matthew 12:34b).

Paul wrote extensively about the Father's house rules and how they work. One example is in Romans 13: **"Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy"** (Romans 13:7-13). You can see by this that nothing is arbitrary about God's house rules as is so often the case with human rules. Every positive and negative rule by which our conduct as believers is to be guided is governed by the motive of love for God above all else and love for people as we love ourselves. In this way God forges new people out of the old.

The combination of a new family empowerment and new house rules provides the grand plan of both child rearing and discipleship. The use of our tremendous freedoms and powers in Christ is contingent upon the development of Christian character as governed by the Father's house rules.

Walter's mother gave him no house, no home, no house rules, and only a contingent form of love. As long as "the son thing" was working for her she would continue, but as soon as she had an opportunity, she dumped him. Living with her must have seemed like a perpetual minefield. No one can live with a scenario which is lose-lose. If Walter loved her with his whole heart as God

programmed him to do, he would have his vulnerability exploited. If he withdrew his love, he would lose the most important relationship of his childhood. In either direction there was a disastrous, shattering brokenness. He would be damaged either way, with little chance of a happy and productive life. Children like Walter, apart from some intervention, are destined to struggle.

But his story does not end there. I will not spoil *Secondhand Lions* for you by saying too much, but Walter would soon discover that there would be a family endowment of unbelievable value in store for him which he did not know anything about. There would be a pattern of home life with two weird old uncles which would begin to heal the wounds of his heart and teach him how to be a man.

We are Walter—apart from Christ. If you have not yet released yourself into God's hands for forgiveness and eternal life you need to know that it is the only way into the Father's house, and the only path to the incomparably rich family endowment he provides. He will teach you, if you choose, to take hold of freedoms and powers beyond your imagination and use them according to his house rules and with his great heart of love. Not even the greatest human family endowment can compare with our riches in Christ-- the knowledge of himself and the powers of the age to come. And nothing will shape our souls and spirits more decisively for good than the love of God as applied through his house rules. I urge you to open your mind to the fresh power of God, and submit yourself to his rule.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the earthly endowment you received from your family is not your destiny. Your destiny is found in your new family endowment in the Father's house, which is your home, now and forever. Make sure you don't miss it!

[clip from *Secondhand Lions* DVD, 0:01:45 to 0:04:30, 2:45 min., avoid shotgun fishing scene]