



I'm Not The Perfect Parent

Part 4 – My Spouse and I Don't Always Agree, But We Are a United Front

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We are in this series and if you feel like, “Okay, I’m not the perfect parent...” If any of these statements resonate with you and you feel something at the core of your being, just let out an “amen,” “that’s right.” Do we have any charismatics in here? A few. No joke, I was recently at a charismatic church. In the middle of preaching, a lady stood up and raised her hand. I’m not charismatic and so I stopped in the middle of the message and said, “Yes, you have a question?” That’s a true story. It’s because she had her finger up and I thought... She didn’t have a question.

So, if you want to raise your hand on any of these statements, feel free to do that. Or just let out a moan or a groan. This is describing parenting:

“Parenting is mostly just informing kids how many more minutes they have of something.” That’s what Josh said.

“No smart phones for my kids. They need to suffer years of fleeting awkward eye contact with strangers like I did.”

“My seven-year-old daughter asked me twice today, ‘What poison would kill someone the fastest?’ And now I’m wondering if I underestimated her.”

“Parenting is 80% making empty threats and 20% picking up miniature toys off the floor.” Those Legos will destroy you like enemy land mines.

“I am saddened by the fact that I am no longer alarmed when my fingers smell like someone else’s poo. This, my friends, is parenting.”

Today, we’re warriors. Today, we are untied fronts. We will not let the children come between us. We want our kids to get this message loud and clear in our homes: Mom and Dad are an unstoppable force.

You know how Mom and Dad have meetings at night, like strategy meetings, debriefing meetings? Guess what? Your kids are doing the same thing. They are only talking to siblings, but also talking to friends. “My dad said...” “What would you do?” “I can’t believe my mom...”

They’re not only talking about it at bedtime – if they share a room – but they text each other from across the house, strategy points against us. “What room is Dad in right now?” As they plan their escape, as

they plan their route, as they plan how they are going to get from one room to another without being bogged down by Mom and Dad's requests.

Today, we're going to start with what my friend, Kevin Leman, says. "*I have seen the enemy and they are small.*" You know what I wanted to do today, but we thought it would be way too messy? We wanted to pass out bleu war paint to the entire congregation and, as part of the message, just have everybody paint the left side of their face blue and instead of going out and asking the kids in Critter Street and WildWoods if they had a good day, we walk out in warrior mode.

We will not be destroyed because kids are plotting against us all the time. Their attacks, their counter attacks, they're coming at us, they're counter flanking us and out flanking us. It's not going to happen anymore. Our children, as they get older, get better. They get more skilled in their tactics. They come to see one parent as more lenient and another as more strict. This can be from issue to issue or request to request. In other words, they know who to ask and when to ask it on each issue and request. "I know the answer that I want, and I know which parent I can get it from. If it's the car, it's going to be more dad. If I want to wear something my mother is going to say no, I'll go ask Dad. He's not paying that much attention."

It's one of my favorite things coming to church. You can tell kids that were dressed by Mom and kids that were dressed by Dad. Dad's kids come in with capes and hats and weapons in their underwear, boots and no pants.

As kids grow older, they realize "I'll get this out of Dad, but I know I won't get it out of Mom." But as a united front, we are one voice, an unstoppable force. So, let's be warriors today. It's my favorite scene in the Braveheart movie when William Wallace walks out and asks the question, "Will you run, or will you fight?" That twerp fellow goes, "We will run." Wallace says, "Run and you will live, but you'll never have your freedom." I know my accent sounds more like an angry leprechaun than it does a mighty Scottish warrior, but I'm going to ask you the same question, Mom and Dad. Will you run or will you fight? Let them hear it in Critter Street! Will you run or will you fight! Welcome to Woodland Hills Family Church. If this is your home church, this is nothing new, but if your new, that probably didn't come across that way over at the Chapel. Yeah, we're an unstoppable force. You will not come between us.

Today, we're going to talk about the bond and honor required for a united front. I've been praying through this message since about August. We talk a lot about prioritizing marriage, but today it's a little different with the united front. I keep coming back to the divorced parents. I keep coming back to those of you with a deep desire to co-parent well. Co-parenting is the technical term, or the official term used, but you could also use united front. Because you and your ex-spouse can come together to parent your child well. You can make that decision, so far as it depends on you.

As we end the message today, it's going to be all application toward the divorced parent who wants to co-parent and you're going to listen through the ears of your ex-spouse. I want to encourage you to please listen through your own ears. Don't be thinking, *Oh, if I could just send the link of this message to him, maybe he'd pick some things up.* No, you ask the Holy Spirit to call you by name. You see what you

can do to begin to honor your ex-spouse. Some of you are going, "My ex-spouse is psycho." As far as it depends on you. We're talking about bond and honor, that which is required for a united front.

Starting with the bond, we learn in scripture that the bond between a husband and wife is to be stronger than the bond between a parent and a child. Children are supposed to leave home, physically, emotionally, relationally. The relationship changes when they leave home. We've been talking about this. There is a season for obedience, but honor is for a lifetime. They leave home physically, emotionally, relationally, financially, and, if necessary, geographically. They are not supposed to be with us forever, but the bond between a husband and wife is to be until one of us lays the other in the arms of Jesus or the Lord returns.

We read this and I'm going to share it from Paul because Paul quotes, in Ephesians, Genesis 2: 24. We're going to be in Genesis 2 and Genesis 1 and also touching in Genesis 3. In Ephesians 5: 31-32, he quotes Genesis 2: 24. ***For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother...*** It is Mom and Dad's job to make sure a child leaves home as an adult, not on a journey to become one. ***...and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.*** When Jesus quoted Genesis 2: 24, he said, ***...so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*** Therefore, let no child separate. Therefore, do not let a medaling in-law separate. Therefore, do not take the child's position in the home and elevate it to where you're now a kid-centered home. No, we are one, Mom and Dad. We're an unstoppable force. We are a united front for our children.

If you go back to Ephesians 5: 32, we read, **This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.** Your child has a front row seat to your marriage. Every day in your marriage, this bond shows your child the relationship between Christ and the church. Every day, your marriage gets to demonstrate the gospel. If you're new to our church and your like, *what about a blended family, what about divorce.* We're going to talk to divorced parents in just a moment, but we did a whole message on how a blended family gets to paint a beautiful picture of the gospel, knowing that we're not perfect people, but we are redeemed people. We tell you not to go on a guilt trip, but ask Jesus to redeem your remaining days. Every day, a marriage gets to paint this beautiful picture to our children, so do not overlook your marriage as one of your greatest parenting strategies – that bond between us.

Shay talked about it last week. We are always painting a picture about who God is to our children and discipline does that. It teaches our kids about the character of God, the attributes of God. One of the best ways to teach your kids about the faithfulness of God is to be faithful to your spouse. It's painting that picture each and every day.

Amy and I try to do that, but Amy and I are very different. We're not the perfect parents. We're not the perfect spouses. We're very different. We come from different backgrounds. We're both from the Midwest, but we have different families of origin. We celebrate holidays differently. We celebrate birthdays differently. We have different views on parenting and parenting strategies. We have different personalities. One is male and one is female. But we have shared values. We brought all this together and said, but this is what we stand on together. We are a united front.

Some people are like, "We're so different, so the term we like to use is irreconcilable differences." Listen, we have a lot of differences, but we are able to come together with shared values. Amy and I are the same number on the enneagram, but it plays out very differently. Some of you think the enneagram is of Satan. Calm down.

We've been working on something that we've talked about in this series and that is validation. Amy and I both would confess before you and our Father in heaven that we are not great at validation. When a child of ours brings pain to us, we are quick to shoot them down with a solution and a life lesson. We are quick and even if we don't say it, our mind is "I told you this was going to happen. I saw it happening. In the moment, I waited so I could have this moment to give you a little lecture." That's bad validation. Validation is simply saying, "You were here." Validation is simply someone sharing with you and you responding with, "I hear what you're saying."

Amy and I are practicing. We go on walks every night. Amy walks me and the dog every night, right before sunset. Yeah, you don't get this body by just sitting on the couch. She's walking me. We're working things out on a walk. It's debrief time. It's like our daily delay now. The other night we were practicing again. She says it to me, and I say it to her. "Hey, I just want to share something with you and all I need is validation." That's our way of saying, "I don't need you to fix it or solve it." She does the same thing to me. "I'm going to share somethings I'm thinking about feeling right now; please don't respond with a solution, a sermon. If I hear you start preaching in your head, I will stop talking." I get it. All I need to say is, "I hear what you're saying. I'm listening." That's all she wants.

I'm not going to tell you what the idea was, but I had an idea... I'm always about 20 yards behind her because we're squeezing our cheeks and walking and she's going as fast as she can go. So, I'm not a good debriefer when I'm completely out of breath. So, I go, "I want to share an idea. I had this crazy thought. All I want you to do is hear it; just validate it." She goes, "Alright." And this is what validation has become in our marriage. I share the idea and from behind her, I see her pause and nod her head. I'm thinking, *She's doing it. She's completely got the idea of validation.* She turns to me and she goes, "Yeah, I hear what you're saying and that is the dumbest idea I've ever heard." I'm not even giving her 50% on that one. That's not validation. But with every issue, in marriage and in family, we're constantly working it out, so we have the shared values.

There are statement we make to our children that undermine the other parent:

Wait until your dad gets home. "What's going to happen when dad gets' home?" "He's going to kill you." Dad comes home and he's had an alright day. "Hey, how's everybody doing?" "Take him back into the room there; I don't want to see him." "What happened?" "You don't need to know; just beat him to within an inch of his life." How many of you still want to know what an inch of your life is worth? I heard it all the time. Mom's had enough! How many times did my dad take me into my bedroom and say, "What did you do?"

Or – I'm going to go back and forth here – **Let's not tell your mother about this.** This is Dad, "Hey, I have an idea; why don't we try..." And you do something that's not a good idea; it's dangerous. It goes wrong. I've done it.

"Hey, Carson, grab that gas can. We're going to go light these trees. Cedar needs a lot of fuel to get going. It doesn't burn really easy. So, I think a gallon should get it going." I have my eight-year-old son pouring gasoline on cedar. We lit it and it went up. We were just red everywhere. I'm like "Hey, let's not tell your mother." It's at that moment that I'm saying, "I don't want to get in trouble. If you do this for me, there will be a time I've got our back." What am I doing? I'm creating an alliance with my child.

Has your child every come in and said, "Man, Mom is in a mood." What do you do at that very moment? "**Your mom's really tired.**" Or do you move your child toward honor, or are you validating... I know this is tricky, but there is a lot that we say and do that begins to erode that united front.

Dad comes home, says or does something, and Mom says, "**Your dad had a rough day at work.**" A better way... And Amy does this with me all the time. If I snap at the kids or say or do something, the kids look at Mom in surprise. Amy will honor me, and she does a great job at this. Then she'll come and find me, and she'll say, "Hey, you said or did this. It kind of hit Carson this way..." What she's doing is we're having our meeting. We're working things out. Amy doesn't have to apologize for me. She doesn't have to justify anything I said or did. She honors me in front of Carson and then gives me the opportunity to go back... And I do; I love that. I'm able to go back and say, "Carson, I'm sorry I said..." "Carson, that had nothing to do with you; this was going on. Will you please forgive me for what I did?"

"I don't know what your Mom was thinking." The kid comes in and says, "Dad, is it fair that I..." The Dad says, "I don't know what she's thinking; I'll talk to her later." Talk to her later, but leave out the "I don't know what she was thinking."

Or maybe there was a consequence that came against one of the kids and you say something like "**I'll talk to your dad and see if I can get him to lighten up a bit on that.**" Now we're seeing the lenient and the strict, the bond, the united front, but this bond, when we add to it the idea of honor... One of the best ways to teach your kids about the faithfulness of God is to be faithful to one another. Married or divorced, one of the best ways to teach your children to honor God, others, and you is to honor each other.

As we move into this, I want every divorced parent... And you're in a new family, you're blending two new families, but yet you still have children that you have to co-parent with an ex-spouse. We move into honor, just asking that you listen and apply with your own ears. If you want your children to honor God, others, and you, show them how you can honor someone who didn't treat you well, how you can honor someone who maybe abandoned you, how you can honor someone who moved away from you and wanted nothing to do with you. You have thrown every word in the book at them. Your kids have even heard you share these words. Maybe you could switch that in your home today. By the power of God in your life, you could become a home of honor. That's something that Gary Smalley taught us all for years at this church.

We start with the idea of honor out of Genesis 1: 27 - ***So God created mankind in his own image...*** This is our basis for value in people. This is how we can honor people. ***...in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.***

I'm raising a son that I want to embrace his biological sex and marry the opposite sex. You've heard me say this over and over again. I'm raising a daughter who I want to embrace her biological sex and marry the opposite sex. I believe that is love, not hate. I believe that is part of God's creative order and it's how he has us to live today and how he has us to parent today.

The idea of the image of God... The theological term for what we just read is the **Imago Dei**. I hope as you learn this, as you study this, you'll see it throughout all of scripture. The image of God. The image of God in man. It's why people have value.

A couple of things to understand about the image of God and man. Through God's creation, you are image bearer. Through faith alone in Christ alone, you are a child of God. Being an image bearer doesn't make you a child of God. Faith in Christ alone does that. This is so important. Why are we so passionate about life? Why are we so passionate to speak out against the murder of children in the womb? Why do we do that? It's because we believe that child is being knit together in the womb... It goes way beyond viability, way beyond a heartbeat, to the fact that that child bears the image of God. When the scripture says thou shall not murder, murder destroys the image of God in man. Why did Jesus welcome children in a day where childhood was seen as an insignificant season of life and children were seen as insignificant and not needed, and it was just a phase they had to get through before they could become productive and worth something in culture? Jesus said, "Bring these children to me" and he blessed them. Why? Because they bear the image of God.

I love when I read in scripture about when Jesus is asked about paying taxes. We all love paying taxes. Jesus said, "Bring me a coin," so they brought a denarius. What does he say about it? He goes, "Oh, this has the image of Cesar, so render unto Cesar that which is Cesar's; it has his image. But you bear the image of God." It's in everything.

I hope this week, as you think through and talk through and have your opinions on immigration, you see every person who crosses the boarder into this country illegally as bearing the image of God. Everyone bears the image of God. We are at a point in our culture... Honor has no room for name calling. None. Name calling the president, name calling... By the way, a lot of what I'm teaching today, I'm brining back up in two or six years because it has no room... Today, even among Christians in the church, I have friends in ministry that are name calling. I can disagree with you and not have to call you a name. I can honor you.

We're in this culture where we have different opinions, but if you believe in and want legal immigration, you're considered a racist. If you stand for heterosexual marriage, you're considered a bigot. Now, among pastor friends, if your church talks too much about marriage, you're considered an idolater. Why are we calling all these names out? Let's get back to honoring people because people are created in the image of God. This is what Gary Smalley taught us. Honor sees the immense value of a person created in the image of God, in this country and other countries. People who think like you and people who don't think like you, people who look like you and don't look like you. But what do we do? We tend to value people based on their age, their status, their income, looks, their sexual orientation, their race, nationality, political party, behavior, abilities, disabilities, intelligence, and kindness.

That's how I'll determine... You hear people say it. "I don't give respect; you have to earn respect. I'm not going to show someone honor until they earn honor." No, you honor people because they are created in the image of God. That alone gives them intrinsic value. They have value.

Gary Smalley said it this way and this is my favorite way he said it, "Honor sees people as personally autographed by God." What did sin do to the Imago Dei? You'll read this and theologians have debated this for centuries. The best way I heard it was 23 years ago in seminary. We were debating the Imago Dei. I have about ten minutes of energy in me for most theological debates. I get to that point where I'm like, "Professor, will you just tell us so I can write it down and teach it for the rest of my life?" But when he said it, it clicked with me and I never forgot it.

Some people would argue that sin removed the image of God in man. It did not. Sin, the fall... We've been in Genesis 1 and 2. The fall in Genesis 3 did not remove the image of God in man; it marred the image of God in man and through faith in Christ Jesus, you are brought into a full and complete relationship with God. There's nothing you can do to make him love you more. There's nothing you can do to make him love you less. You are an image bearer of Almighty God, but through faith in Christ alone, you are a child of God. Please here that distinction today. That's our basis for honor.

1 Peter 2 says, **Honor...** Esteem as highly valuable, as personally autographed. ...***all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king*** [Donald Trump]. I'm going to bring that up again in two years or six years, because this congregation is going to need that. We find it easier to honor some and less easy to honor others when we're called to honor all.

John Calvin put it this way. "...remember not to consider men's evil intention but... look upon the image of God in them, which... with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them." That's why in Romans 12 we read, **10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.**

11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. How can you honor someone with evil intentions? How can you honor someone who stands against everything you believe? How can you honor an ex-spouse and co-parent well? I believe there are some things you can do so far as it depends on you.

If you're trying to co-parent well right now and you have a difficult ex-spouse... I'd even say some of you are single parents, so you don't have another parent. You're not blending a family and your ex-spouse has abandoned you and you feel all alone. I'm glad you're here today because that's what the church can be for you and with you. We can help you. Take on these voices that are speaking into the lives of your children. Let them be an additional voice in the life of your child. We can come alongside you. We want to help you. We want to be an additional voice in your life.

For some of you, it's like *I don't know how to deal with this ex-spouse and we're not getting anywhere.* These are four points for you on how you can honor your ex-spouse and co-parent well.

1. Take personal responsibility for your own attitudes and actions. Avoid every attempt to control or manipulate your ex-spouse. Didn't we say this in the beginning? Your children are brilliant, and I'm convinced they get more brilliant the older they get. If they've been able to play you for a while now,

they see it. Since 93% of communication is non-verbal, what are they picking up from you about your ex. What are they picking up in your non-verbals? You take personal responsibility for what you say.

2. Agree on logistics before the meetup. Don't use your child as a messenger. Even if the other parent does this, we're talking to you now. You don't use your child as a messenger. One way you can do this and it's a really simple way... What is your ex-spouse's preferred method of communication? Is it texting? Is it the phone? Sometimes parents squabble over that. If he really responds to texts well... If she would really prefer a phone call, do the phone call. Keep it cordial, keep it just to the basics, but we're going to agree on logistics rather than communicating through the child. We're going to be the adults and not ask the child to pass information between us.

3. If you are the less seen parent – you spend the least amount of time with your child – avoid becoming the Disney parent. This is important and most experts agree on this. Nothing against Disney. I love Disney. This means for the best interest of your child... You can study this and come to the same conclusion I believe. Children want to do normal things. It's healthy for them to do normal things. So, if you are the less seen parent, run errands, help with homework, go to appointments, do everyday, ordinary stuff, and not every day and every moment you're with them has to be this big, high energy, expensive meetup. It allows that united front to continue.

4. Be the parent. Avoid creating an alliance with your child against the other parent. Will you make this commitment? Will you begin to honor? You want your children to learn how to honor God, others, and you. Pray that the Lord gives you everything you need to see the image of God in your ex-spouse and you begin to honor them.

Here's the statement I want to encourage you to make. **Out of reverence for Christ and for the benefit of my children, I will honor _____.** Put her name in there. Put his name in there. Speak it. Share it with him. Share it with her. Share it with your children. If they've seen years and years of dishonor, become a home of honor and be one that begins to esteem as highly valuable.

As we close, I want to share with you something that the Lord is working through our church and it's through a lot of leaders and it's through a lot of us. It's a sacred echo for me. We're doing a series next month called *The Friend of Sinners*. It's something I've been studying for the last year or two, just asking the Lord how we can be a church known for affirming biblical marriage, affirming heterosexual marriage, being people of the book who believe this is what God created marriage to be. How can we do that and be the most loving church to the LGBTQ community?

Do you know what the word that keeps coming back is? It's honor. The question is always asked, "Did God create me this way?" He created you in the image of God. You are an image bearer. Despite your lifestyle, despite what you're doing. The word *honor* keeps coming back. Here's all I'm asking because some of you are not prepared, but I just want to tell you we're doing a whole message in *The Friend of Sinners* on befriending the LGBTQ community. If you've been here for a while, you know my passion for speaking about biblical marriage. You know what we believe on that. I'm going to touch on it and reiterate everything we believe about marriage, but then talk to us about how we can love and care for as Jesus.

Guess what? Jesus was called a lot of names. I sat here this week wondering why we were name calling. Jesus was called a drunkard, a glutton; he was called a lot of names. I do want to share this with you and the reason I'm sharing it with you is... and I'm not committing to it. How about that. I said I'm praying. You know the difference between prayer and commitment. Okay, there you go. We're not going to tape it and we're not going to livestream that Sunday. You say well why not? Just please hear my heart on this. We don't have the resources or staff in our church to take this from outside the local church context. So, this is going to be a local church family message. It's why I'm a pastor of a local church. This is my priority and everything I love and care for this body. I want us to learn how to do this well. I want to learn how to do this well. So, I encourage you to be here for that whole series. It's going to kick off the first of October.

I ask for your prayers on that and some of you might say I need to record it because you're not going to be here. I'm sorry, that's not any other thing than this needs to be a church family conversation in how we deal with this. But it's all rooted in honor, esteeming people as highly valuable. I think this is going to set so many of us free because we get so stuck in anger and hatred and bitterness towards people who don't think like us, look like us, act like us. Can I tell you to put all that aside for a second? We want to think like Jesus. We want to act like Jesus. He is our example for how we love and how we care and how we believe. I just want you to know there's nothing about our beliefs that have changed, but there is much we need to do to love and care for people who are far from God. And all God's people said... Amen.

Father, in the name of Jesus, I pray for the single parent right now who is thinking through ways to honor throughout co-parenting. I pray that he or she feel encouraged in this church, supported in this church, knowing they are loved in this church. We want to do everything we can to help them see people as you see them. Help all of us in that.

For the families that are blending and co-parenting, the challenges that come with that, that maybe before discussing, they would sit down with Bibles in hand and time in prayer with you. That they would just be at peace and be quiet to allow you, through your Word, to speak to them.

I just pray for all of the families in here, knowing the struggles that we all deal with in raising kids and doing married life, we want to be examples of people, knowing we're not perfect, but taking steps each and every day to live the life that Jesus has called us to.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, today I pray that they would confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead as they confess their sins before you and receive Jesus the Savior. Faith alone in Christ alone. That today would be the day of their salvation and entering into that relationship with you.

It's in the name of Jesus that everyone agreed and said... Amen.