

A Biblical Theology of the Household

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[0 : 00] Welcome back. I'm continuing my series of answers to questions that have been left by listeners. And today, the question comes from someone on Curious Cat. The question is, is there a biblical theology of the household you could outline for us in a YouTube video?

Not a small question at all. This will have to be off the top of my head, so I'm sure that I'll miss many of the bases that I'd want to cover if we were doing a longer piece on the subject.

But here goes. I think the first thing to say about the household is that it's not just the family. It's not just the house or the home or even the domestic sphere.

It's far broader than all of those things. It includes the people within the family. It includes the house and includes the domestic sphere and things like that.

But it's broader than that, including everything that belongs to the family. It includes the people that are within the realm of the family, people who have been welcomed into that realm.

[1 : 07] It includes animals. It includes possessions. It includes a realm of activity and dominion within the world. And so the household, in many respects, can be seen as a realm of dominion.

The realm of dominion that is the proper possession of a particular body of people bound together as a family. It's a solidarity of life. It's a living society.

It's not just an institution as a system. A system can survive indefinitely. It's not a living thing.

Whereas the household is bound up with the family and is something that develops over time. It's a living organism and it develops through stages. So a couple get together and they form a life together.

They build a world around themselves. They bear children that they welcome into that world. And they accumulate possessions and influence within the world. In all of these ways, that's the household growing.

[2 : 10] The household is the realm that is created around the family. The orbit that it creates around itself through the gravity that it exerts upon its surroundings.

It's a realm of hospitality. It's a realm of belonging and communion. You belong to a household. It's somewhere where life is experienced together, not just in solitude.

It's an orienting realm. It presents people with an interior, an exterior, an anterior and a posterior.

There's a before represented by the family.

It's something that passes on through generations. There's a continuation there. There is inheritance that's bound up with the household. The household is not just something accumulated by people in one generation.

It's something that is built up over time. You build up your household. It's something that moves into the future. Parents have children and they will bequeath their household to their children.

[3 : 21] They instruct their children and direct them into the future. And they recall the past. It's a realm of the interface and interaction between the generations. Out of the movement, indeed, from one generation to the next.

And so, in these respects, it's an elaboration of the natural reality of male and female and the family. Those dynamics by which we are formed as larger communities are ones that find their root primarily within the household.

And within the life of the family. So, male and female, moving from one generation to the next. The relationship between children and their parents.

All these sorts of things are preserved by the household. But not just those things. It's also a realm that is opened up to the wider world.

And so, the interior is a realm that belongs to those within the household. But it's also a political reality.

[4 : 27] It engages with the wider world. It has weight within societies as a whole. We tend to think of the household within our society as just the domestic sphere. This privatised realm that you retreat to after you've done your work for the day.

Whereas within scripture, the household and the family are public. Realities with public and social and civil weight. And so, the household is an entity that has political ramifications.

The household acts as a political entity. It is the building block of society. Not just the detached individual that can be placed into these abstracted systems.

And these dead systems. The household is something that arises out of an organic reality. And grows into something that's elaborating upon that natural institution.

It's a realm of succession. As I mentioned. It's also a particular and a particularising realm.

Everyone's family, everyone's household is different. And every household is not just a system or a technique.

[5 : 35] It's a rooted reality. It's a reality rooted in a particular place. In a particular time. It comprises of particular individual persons. It's not just an abstract system into which you can slot anything.

It's a very particular reality that is sustained through time. And as a particular reality, it's something that trains us in what it means to love. To be people who are bound to a particular place and reality. Love is not just a general benevolence to all things. Love is something that particularises its objects. And is something that is elicited by our bonds with particular objects.

And with particular persons. The affection that you develop for a particular place. For a particular set of objects. Objects that maybe belong to your grandparents. Or something like that.

All of these things are bound up with what it means for the household to be the household. The household is a rooted, embedded reality. Engaged with a particular world.

[6 : 41] With a world that has been formed around the life of a man and a woman. Their children. The people within their wider scope that they have invited in.

Because the family in scripture is always a realm of hospitality. It's a realm that can include many people beyond the immediate family members. It's not just biological descendants.

It can include servants. It can include strangers who are given hospitality. All these sorts of people can come within the orbit of the household.

Even if only temporarily. It's a realm of provision and mutual support. It's a realm where we don't labour alone. But it's a realm of common labour.

A common labour for a common good. And the common good is the accumulated wealth of the household that's passed on. It's the shared life of the household.

[7 : 39] In the joy and the fellowship. And the health that are shared together. And it's also a realm of sharing and teaching.

And preserving that knowledge that passes on from generation to generation. Now this household is an expression of the ordering of marriage and the family out into the world.

And so if we're looking for a biblical foundation of the household. The best place to start is somewhere like Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1, God's creation of the world. And then God creates man and woman within his world for the sake of his world.

And he creates the man first. He creates the man with the task of... He creates the man for the sake of tilling the earth. And taming the wider earth.

Forming it. And places him within a garden. A realm that is given to the trust of the man. The man has to take care of this. He has to guard it.

[8 : 42] And he has to serve it. And he has to maintain God's boundaries within it. The command not to eat of the tree. Of the knowledge of good and evil. But also the privilege of eating of all the other trees.

This is a realm that is given to the man for his rule. And his control. And for his service. And then the woman is created to assist him in that.

And this realm that is created around the man and the woman. Is a differentiated realm. It's a realm where the man and the woman play different parts within that larger world. And their relationship is ordered to and around that realm.

So if we tend to... We tend to think of marriage in abstraction from the world into which it serves. So we think about a man and a woman looking at each other face to face.

And relating to each other like that. Whereas God created man and woman and the family and marriage. Within a world and for the sake of a world. For the sake of its service. The place of the garden in relationship to the man and the woman in Genesis 2.

[9 : 45] Is important to recognise. Because that is constitutive in part of their relationship. It's a realm of dominion that they share in common. A realm that they're supposed to form and fill.

And they're supposed to go out into the wider world. And bring God's order to bear upon that realm. And so understanding it that way. I think it can help us to see why the life of a man and a woman in a marriage.

Is not just a private relationship. But it's this larger reality that goes out into the world. It's a realm of common creation. Of common ownership. And of common rule.

It's a domain that they share. And as I mentioned yesterday. The vision in somewhere like the end of Proverbs.

The woman there. She's someone who has built. And created. Formed a great household around her. The vision that you have there. Is not just of the economically active woman.

[10 : 47] That is not seen as a glorious vision in scripture. Per se. The glorious vision is that. This is her house that she has formed. This is her reality. Her world that orbits around.

The life that she has at the heart of it. And the man and the woman. Together have created this kingdom. That they share. And that is the vision that you see in embryo.

In Genesis 2. That builds out elsewhere in scripture. We can see the fullness of a good household. Is when that relationship between a man and a woman.

Lies at the heart. Of a rich and full realm of hospitality. Of ownership. Of dominion. Of engagement with the world. And with society.

It is a realm where. There is. There is. A place where. Their life expands. Into something far far greater.

[11 : 45] Where their. Their union. Is just a seed. Of a. Great realm of. Rule within the world. And of hospitality for others.

And so. As we abstract. Marriage and the family. From this wider fabric of reality. We lose sight of the household. Because the household. Is what happens.

When. That relationship. Is embedded in reality. Engaged fully in reality. And it. Fab. It forms this fabric of reality. This world.

Around itself. And the household. Is. As it were. The. The full expression. Of. What it means. For a man and woman. To be brought together.

And become one flesh. The one flesh. Is not just. A private union. Between them. It's a world. That they form around them. Into which. Many people. Can be drawn. Into its orbit.

[12 : 41] Now. In our society. It's difficult. For us. To understand this. It's difficult. For us. To understand it. In part. Because we have experienced. Multiple forms. Of alienation. Alienation.

From the household. Which is. An organic. Human form of life. That is elaborated. Into. A form of engagement. With the world. And it's. First of all.

That form of life. Is placed within the world. For the sake of engagement. And then. It develops out from that. But we've alienated. Labour. From the household. The household. Is not a realm. Of labour.

For us. And so. What it means. To exercise. Dominion. As the household. And in the household. Makes less sense. For us. We've. Alienated.

Labour. From its fruits. So. We. Earn money. But. There's less of a sense. Of the household. Being a realm. Of production itself. And that the.

[13 : 36] Actions that we do. And the fruit of those actions. Are things that we own. And they are expressions. Of our dominion. Whereas the household. Preserves that connection. And it preserves the connection.

Between character. And labour. It. Has also resulted in. Alienation from man. From woman. Within the household. The man and the woman. Are working together.

To create this world. And so. The man and the woman. Labour together. As husband and wife.

They're not. Usually working together. Side by side. In everything that they do.

But. They're working towards. A common good. Towards a common end. Whereas now. We think. Very much of individuals. Interchangeably. Engaged within the marketplace.

And the modern workplace. Is a unisex environment. Where. Most people. Who work within that environment. Spend far more time. Working with their. Colleagues of the other sex. Than they do with their.

[14:30] Partner. And their spouse. And so. There has been. A deep alienation there. This is a radically. Unusual form of life. This is not something.

That exists. In most societies. The household. Is an organic. Form of life. Which has been developed. In various. Different forms. Within different societies. But. In each case. It's rooted within. This union. Of man and woman. It's rooted within. The relationships. Between the generations. It's rooted in. The particularity. Of place. And the way that. That union. Is elaborated. Into that. Form of engagement. And interface. With that particular place. Then there's an alienation. Of children. From parents. And generations. From each other. Children are. Increasingly. Outsourced. To other. Carers. To other teachers. And so. The family. As a realm. Of pedagogy. And training.

[15:23] And orienting. Children. Into the world. Is no longer. So active. And one example. Of this. Is the. Family.

As a realm. Or the household. As a realm. Of labor. It would be passed on. From generation. To generation. It wouldn't just be. A single generation. An individual. Working to support. His family. In his own. Trade. Rather. It would be. A trade. That the rest. Of the family. Supported. And got involved in. And father. Would train his son. To take over. The family business. Afterwards. And there would be. Succession there. Now. There are good and bad things. Within that situation. But. The sense of ownership. And succession. And continuity. Are very important. Likewise. The alienation. Of individuals. From communities. The household. Is somewhere. Where there's a deep. Rooted belonging. And an identity.

[16:16] That is given to you. With all these different. Relationships. That I mentioned. It situates you. In an internal realm. A realm. That is deeply. Shared. Between a group. Of people.

Their family. And the other people. Within that. Or the orbit. Of the household. And that is expressed. In many different ways. It's expressed. With the interior. Language. That a family. Can build around itself. It can be expressed. In the joy. Of song. And then there's also. A relationship. With the wider world. As the family. And the household. Are realms. With authority. And weight. Politically. It's not just. The individual. Acting. As a political agent. But. The family acts. And certain people act. On behalf of the family. As representatives. Of the family. And this is a significant change. Within our society. That we. Think of just. Individuals. Detached individuals. Acting. In.

[17:10] Abstraction. From the family. Without any reference. To the family. And societies. Dealing with individuals. Within the family. Again. Without reference. To the family structure. Itself.

And so the abstraction. Of individuals. From community. Is another thing. That needs to be. Born in mind. And in scripture. The ideal is. The bringing together. Of all these different things. The. Idea of. Man and woman. Being joined together. In a common realm. Of rule. Within the world. The idea of. This. Realm. Of. Shared life.

Being. Also. A realm of dominion. That the life. That is shared. Is not just. This. Realm of retreat. And domestic. Reservation. But it's a realm.

That is deeply engaged. And powerfully active. And involved. And productive. And creative. Within the world. And that's the ideal. It's something that. Brings together. Our engagement.

[18:04] Within the particular realm. Within a particular bond. But it also. Develops that. Into a realm. Of productivity. And engagement. It's also something.

That creates. A very tight bond. Between the generations. As a realm. Of succession. Of inheritance. Of teaching. And training. Of passing on skills.

And all these things. That preserve. That human bond. Between the generations. Now we have systems. That take the place. Of the household. In many respects. The modern business. Is a system. That largely takes. The place. Of the household. As do certain things. Like schools. And other things like that. To a certain extent.

Certain weight. That used to exist. Upon the household. Has now been shifted. To them. And that is significant. As the outsourcing. Of all these things. To other agencies. Gradually weakens.

[19:02] The family. And the household. And so when. The families. Within our society. Are breaking up. That's in part. Because there's not much weight. Placed upon them. If we really need.

The family to survive. To do well. Then we put weight. On the family. And it becomes strong. The family is something. That is strengthened. Through pressure. And through the weight. That is placed upon it.

When there's little weight. Placed upon it. And it's just a matter of. Private affiliation. It becomes a lot easier. To break down. And then within scripture.

Salvation is addressed. To households. Households are not just. Collections of individuals. They're realms of a common life. A common engagement.

With reality. Common dominion. It's a realm of. Teaching. And it's a realm. Which has an ordered. Structure to it. It's not just. Individuals.

[19 : 55] Brought together. Within this one container. As it were. Rather there's a head. To the household. There's also. One who stands at its heart. With the. The wife. And the mother.

Is someone who stands. At the heart of the household. She's. As it were. The tree of. The human. Tree of life. In the middle of the human garden. The garden of the household. Grows out. Of the life. Of the mother.

Primarily. And she's the center. Of gravity. At its midst. Whereas the father. Is the head of the household. He's the one. Who represents. Primarily. The household. Into the wider world.

He's the one. Who acts. On behalf. Of the household. Into that wider world. And again. When we abstract. The household. From the world. And we start to have.

Just detached families. And realms of. Sentimental retreat. We lose a sense. Of what that headship. Can mean. Because the headship. Of Christ. For instance. Is a headship. That is not.

[20 : 48] Primarily. A rule over. The church. It's not a rule. Over the church. Primarily. But a rule. Over the world. For the sake. Of the church. And so. His.

Powerful action. Out into the world. Is something. That empowers us. As his people. We're. Blessed. In the fact. That he. Is powerful. Within the world.

That he acts. On our behalf. That he represents us. That he is our head. And as we've detached. The family. And the household. From the wider society. That relationship.

Has become confused. It's become. A sort of. Ingrown relationship. Where. The. Headship. Of the. The man. Is very much. A headship. That. Can be expressed.

Through. Just. Petty. A petty. Patriarchal. Patriarchalism. Where he. Trying to rule. And. Create these. Micromanaging.

[21 : 44] Structures. For the other people. Within the household. That's not the biblical. Vision at all. Rather. The household. Is a realm. Of powerful. Engagement. It's a realm. That's supposed. To grow out.

Into the world. A realm. That is supposed. To be the center. Of gravity. For the whole. Of life. This is not. Just something. That we. Go back to. At the end. Of the day. At the office. This is something. That should be. At the very heart. Of all that we do. It's not just. Because. This is an idealized vision. This. In some ways. This is a vision. That would be very hard.

To realize. Within our time. And so we can. Put certain things. Back together. We can't restore it all. But what we should. Seek to do. Is to. Recognize.

The importance. Of building society. Around the human. Structures. The human bonds. That are most important. Around the bond. Between our labor. And our life.

[22 : 38] Around the bond. Between man. And woman. Around the bond. Between one generation. And the generation. That follows. Around the bond. Between children. And parents. Around the bond.

Between our character. And our labor. Around the bond. Between labor. And ownership. And in all these respects. Our society falls far short.

We have a great deal of power. Within the world. But this power. Tends to be. It tends to be abstracted. From a particular relationship. Of love.

With a realm of life. And a commitment. To that realm of life. To preserving that realm. To blessing the people. And providing for the people. Within that realm. And a realm.

Of common ownership. In all these respects. I think. Many of the economic issues. That we face. Within our society. Around justice. And economics. A lot of these.

[23 : 32] Relate to the breakdown. Of the household structure. And we need to think about that. Within the New Testament. In places like Acts. We see the baptism. Of households.

The whole groups of people. Are baptized. And this is because. They share a common life. They share a common orientation. And when the head of the household. Is converted. That has a ripple effect.

For everyone within. And it is almost presumed. That everyone else. Is implicated within that. And there will. Of course. Be some people. Perhaps within the family.

These sorts of families. And households. That will not want to follow. And will not want to convert. But. The presumption is. That once the head of the household.

Has converted. Everyone else. Is implicated within that. And. Likewise. In the Old Testament. Salvation occurs. In household form. So Abraham. And his household.

[24 : 30] Are brought out of Ur of the Chaldees. His. Not just. Him and his wife. But all the people around him. All his servants. All his. Wide relations as well.

Are brought. And you see this. Idea of an orbit around people. That's. All these people are included. And. We are saved.

Not just as detached individuals. But as bodies of people. Likewise with Noah. And. Elsewhere in scripture. We see this household principle. Very clearly expressed.

So for instance. As Paul talks to the Philippian jailer. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will be saved. And the verse continues. Both you and your household. Now.

Many people would like to say. That that's just. If you are converted. You will be saved. And your household. If they are converted. They will be saved too. But yet. There's the assumption. That in this shared body of life.

[25 : 25] In this shared communion of life. And common belonging. That as the Philippian jailer converts. His household will. As a natural. In natural course.

They will convert too. That doesn't mean that faith. Isn't important for them. Quite the opposite. It means that their faith. Is not just this detached. Individual faith. But it can be a shared faith.

Of a community. That they are participating in. And the presumption is. If they are truly participating. In that community. And if the head of that community. Has converted. They will follow suit.

And so this vision. Within scripture. Is not such. That the family. Is automatically saved. Or the household. Is automatically saved. Just because the head. Of the household converts. But rather.

It's the assumption. That the rest. Of the household. Is included. Within the life. Of. That is represented. By the head. And as they convert. Then the rest.

[26 : 21] Of the family. Will follow them. In that course. Now this. Has implications. For infant baptism. Or subjects like that. I won't get into that here. And this has been. A very rough. And rambling treatment.

Of the subject. It's hard to. Pull together. All the threads. Of a subject. As big. As the. That of the household. But I hope this is. A helpful start. For thinking through.

Some of these issues. These issues. Have great significance. Not just for thinking about. For thinking about. Issues like baptism. But they have significance. For thinking about.

The relationship. Between man and woman. The relationship. Between humanity. In the world. The way that we approach. Our economies. The way that we. Relate the family. To business.

All these sorts of things. And I hope that. Many of you will. Look into this subject more. Because there's a lot there. To be explored. And it's very important. Within our current situation.

[27 : 14] In society. I'll see you again tomorrow. Hope that you find this helpful. Hope that you find this helpful.