

## TEN QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL HOME

Luke 1:5–25

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Luke 1:5–25 (NIV)

“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the LORD’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.” Then skipping down to verse 13, “But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the LORD. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the LORD their God. And he will go on before the LORD, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the LORD.’”

From this Scripture, today, I take as my message title, “Ten Qualities of a Successful Home.” I realize when you hear that title, maybe there’s some instant responses that you have.

Perhaps one of them is, “I wonder if my home will measure up. I’m going to take notes on what the pastor is saying and write down all ten and test our home.”

Maybe another response is, “I’m not even married. I don’t have a home at this moment, in the traditional sense of a home.”

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My message is for people with both kinds of responses, because the first five qualities of a home that I will deal with relate to the married couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And the second five qualities relate to the single person, John the Baptist. When you hear the word “home,” if you’re not in an immediate family unit, perhaps you’re single or away from home and in college, just take the word “home” and make it “life” and translate the message that way for yourself.

### **I. The first quality in a successful home is that the people in it are priests unto God.**

That’s what we see first in the Scripture of Zechariah and Elizabeth. We see that Zechariah was a priest, and he was married to a priest’s daughter, Elizabeth. I don’t know of anything more wonderful that can be said about a home than the fact that, in that home, the parents are priests. I will realize that the Old Testament priesthood is different than the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the priesthood pertained to the temple institution. There were twenty thousand priests living at the time of Christ. Each of them would only come to Jerusalem twice a year, for a week at a time, to serve in the temple area and to be of help in the ministry pertaining to the ordinances or sacrifices of the Temple. There was a lot of difference between the Old Testament priesthood and now.

In the New Testament, every one of us is a priest. We all are—in the Book of Revelation, three times there is a specific mention of the fact that we are priests, every one of us unto God. We get the model of what our priesthood involves looking back to the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, a priest was one who worshipped God. He was one who made acceptable sacrifices to God. And a priest was one who cared for the visible temple of God on earth.

We translate that into our own experience of priests of God. Our fundamental mission in life, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We are all worshippers of God. That ought to be a fundamental mission of life. As priests, we make acceptable sacrifices. Paul says,

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in Romans 12, to “present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service.” A priest in the Old Testament was concerned with the visible temple of God on earth. The New Testament priest gives himself or herself to minister the visible ministry of Christ on earth. He is concerned about the body of Christ, the Church of the Lord.

I really feel that failure to be a priest or priestess is at the very heart of family problems. Failure to minister to God is a root cause of family disruption. I think of the experience of a couple that I counseled. The wife began feeling, along into the marriage, “I’m tired of this marriage. I don’t love my husband any more. I think I’ll try the dating situation and leave him, and see if I can find a guy I can fall in love with.” She happened to wind up in my office after some very distressing things had happened in her life. Some physical violence directed against her. Her husband, meanwhile, had long gone to another state. I was sharing with her, “You know what your real problem is not that you don’t have love for your husband.” She said, “But I don’t really love my husband and I’ll never be able to love him again.” I said, “That’s the fundamental mistake you’re making. The romantic idea of love is that we feel like we’re in love, and if we feel like we’re in love, we’ll make a commitment. The biblical understanding of love is to make the commitment and, ultimately, the feeling will come if your commitment is right.” I said, “Your fundamental problem is your need to make things right with God. You are not right with God in your life. God is just waiting to restore the relationship. Even if you don’t feel anything for God. But if you’ll make the relationship right with God, God will give you feelings for Himself and the same thing will apply to your husband.”

I’m not making this situation universal—that all marriage problems are like this story, and you can solve every problem this way. But there is a fundamental truth: When anyone in a marriage relationship or a family relationship is out of synchronization with the Holy Spirit, things are

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going to get messed up. Ultimately, she got down on her knees in my office got and began to pray. God gave her a beautiful time of breaking down under the work of the Holy Spirit. She got up with tears and said, “What do I do now?” I said, “Why don’t you call your husband and see if there’s any way you can get together and talk?”

Several days later, she came into my office and said, “Our relationship is really repaired. We’re getting back together and God has even given me the feelings back.” I said, “It all came because you were willing to make commitment to God.”

If God is not first in our life, if God is not first in our homes, we have little hope of ever making a really successful home.

Like the experience someone was sharing with me of a Midwestern family getting up in the morning to go to church. Sometimes—especially if you have a family of four kids like this particular family had back in Nebraska—it’s a struggle to get them all in the car and to church on time. Inevitably, you’d have family fights and carry over things going on from the night before and that kind of thing. This particular husband was telling me once, “By the time I got those four kids in the car, with all the family problems involved in just getting them in the car, we were all so mad at one another we were ready to kill each other. And we were all going to church in the same car.” I said one time in the car to my wife, “What in the world are we doing going off to church as out of sync as we are with one another?” She said, “I suppose that the church is the best place we could go to find the help and the encouragement we need.”

That’s really true. When our lives are having difficulties, it’s time to be a priest before God.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were priests in the time of Herod. Notice that Luke the historian links the story in real time and space. It’s not a fairy tale. He doesn’t begin with “Once upon a time,” or “Far, far ago in a distant time and place,” but “In the time of Herod.” Herod, the man who had

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had ten wives, serial monogamy, who had murdered his favorite wife and murdered his three kids, an able administrator, an able executive, an able builder but a failure in his personal life. In the time of Herod, these people were being priests to God. It's possible to live for God in tough times. This family was. Their relationship with God was where it should've been.

Is your relationship in your home where you want it... where God wants it? That's what's important. Be a priest to God—the first step to success.

### **II. The second step—living the kind of life which models or represents the character of God.**

The text of Scripture says to us that Elizabeth and Zechariah were upright before the Lord. When we use that phrase, we recognize that Scripture is not teaching us that we come to God seeking a righteousness based on our own good deeds or good works. It simply means that when the average observer looked at Zechariah and Elizabeth's life, they saw their life as a kind of model of qualities that are so outstanding and upstanding, you want to see them in a home. They were godly and their life was upright.

What does it mean to be godly? I think there was a time in my life, if you were to ask me what godly was—when I was a younger person—I would have said, “Godliness means to be weird or negative.” People who wear the godly title are often weird or negative. But godliness really means to be a person who is sparkling with grace, sparkling with forgiveness and good cheer. The tone of voice is very important in the home; someone can very easily slip into the wrong tone of voice. A right tone of voice is godly character in action. To be godly is to have the fruit of the Spirit, to be a loving, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled person. We should strive for those kinds of things in our experience—to be upright, to be successful in modeling the character of God.

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### III. The third quality in a successful home is applying God's Word faithfully to everyday living.

When you read verse 6, you find that Elizabeth and Zechariah were observing all the commandments and regulations blamelessly. There's a distinction between these two words, "commandments" and "regulations." "Commandments" has to do with the Ten Commandments, the broad principles that talk about the basics in life, basic morality. The regulations are the specific ways, God's broad laws which apply to everyday, nitty-gritty living. They were doing both. They were talking God's commandments and relating them, by the regulations, to everyday life, successfully applying God's Word.

How difficult it is to really do this and how many times Christians fail at doing this. Sometimes our failures are very noticeable to the world. I know some of you read *The Register*; sometimes there've been attitudes Christians have reflected even in the paper. There's no graciousness there. There's no kindness. Then we know people who use the Christian name to get business and then don't pay their bills and don't do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay...all these things under the name of Christ.

I ran across a letter to the editor in *The Register* this week. I don't know if what this lady writes is true or not. I make no judgment on the truth of the story. But it sort of represents, sometimes, the perception of people who say they have a faith and don't live it. "I live in an apartment," this woman writes. "The apartment project is about half full of single mothers trying to support children. Speaking from experience, it's not easy. I know a man who is now remarried, he drives his choice of cars. He was born again just last year and owns a lovely home in Tustin. He holds prayer meetings in the morning in his business. Unfortunately, all this does not leave him with enough money to support his former wife and three children with the amount agreed upon. He

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used to attend church services each week. I don't know if he still does. Unfortunately, this does not leave him any time to spend with his children except the five or ten minutes a month he stops in to pay a token amount." This is a person the writer is saying—and again we have no idea if she has all the facts or not, but suppose what she's saying is true—here's a situation where a person is really getting spiritual, but in their moral and ethical obligations, their life is not only falling short of the letter of the law but even short of the spirit of the law, of applying commandments to daily life.

One of the greatest needs in our home is that we need to take the Word of God and apply it to life. I've found these are the greatest needs in our home: the need for praise. We need to praise one another. We need to encourage one another. The need to give thanks for one another. The need to forgive one another.

These three basic qualities in a successful home, the first three qualities are ones that describe our relationship with God, the assumption, of course, in Scripture being that what our relation with God lacks, our family life lacks as well.

### **IV. The fourth quality in a successful home is surviving the barren times.**

There were two bad things in Jewish life that could happen to a male. The first bad thing is he might never get married. The second bad thing is he might never have a child. Zechariah and Elizabeth had had the second bad thing happen to them. After all, doesn't Psalm 120:8 say, "Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord"? And here's Elizabeth and Zechariah, who we know are upright before the Lord and serve Him blamelessly, and yet they are without child, and she is well along in years. This is a phrase, I think, to suggest she is past the age of childbearing. I'm sure they have well-

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intentioned friends who come and wrap their arms around them and say, “Brother, you don’t have enough faith,” or, “There’s sin in your life.” Or, meaning well, they quote the Scripture “Those who fear the Lord will be like a fruitful vine within their house.” “You must not fear the Lord, Zechariah. You’re doing something wrong.”

It was tough for them to go through life with barrenness in their life. Tough to go through the suspicion of people who would always equate loss in our life with sin or lack of faith; but there was no sin in their life and there was no lack of faith.

Our daughter is away at college. She has a problem with a swelling sometimes of joints. She called us and was hurting a great deal because her knee joints were swollen and inflamed. In fact, she said it looked like her knee was twice its normal size. So we were trying to encourage her. What had really discouraged her was that there were some girls in her hall who were trying to find out what sin she had committed or were trying to tell her she hadn’t enough faith or she would already be healed and she needn’t be suffering with this. We tried to encourage her. “You know we believe in healing. We’ve seen God heal in our own family and in our own church—no question about that. But sometimes, for reasons unknown to us, we go through this type of time you’re going through. We’ll continue to pray for you.” I was very concerned about her being so downcast by what people were putting on her, the guilt they were driving on her. So I got a fatherly inspiration. I said, “I want you to do this. I want you to go get a raw onion and eat it and then when these people come along and tell you there’s sin in your life or you haven’t enough faith, I want you to tell them what your father said and I want you to tell them that if they have enough faith, they will confess that you have good breath.” Sort of a fatherly thing to do. It’s amazing what we’ll do to stick up for our kids.

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Lest you question my theology, I'm certain some people aren't healed because they don't exercise faith. But that's not true in all cases. And you cannot attribute Zechariah and Elizabeth's barrenness to anything other than the plan and program and purpose of God. Tough times in a family can bring a cleaving in that family or it can bring a cleft in the family.

Sometimes, a family goes through great loss, such as the loss of a child, and the parents can't really handle that. Ultimately that becomes a triggering thing that clefts them. Other people go through hardship and it brings them into union and cleaving. Zechariah and Elizabeth, through their barren times, had put their hope in the Lord. There's a certain kind of thing that happens when we go through suffering. Suffering produces endurance. It produces character. It gives us that staying power of life. God's delays are not God's denials. Zechariah and Elizabeth just had to learn to be patient and depend upon God.

Patience is a very difficult thing for us to learn. It's difficult for me, I'll be quick to confess. I know a banker who happens to be a Christian and I see him periodically. He gave me two tickets to the Angels' game on Monday night. Great seats. They're about twenty seats back, between home plate and third base. Great. I thought they were playing Kansas City, the first game of the series, they're going for the pennant, why not go? I took my son, George, and went to the game. It just seems like every time I go to an Angel's game, they lose. And when I go, they lose big. So the sixth inning had come and it was six to nothing. The guy sitting next to me had already smoked twenty cigarettes on me and drank I don't know how many beers, and I felt like I was reeking by that time. It was a hot night and I wasn't in the mood to stay and watch this lopsided game. I knew Reggie was coming up, trying for his five-hundredth home run. He was first up in the bottom of the seventh and I wanted to stay for that, but I said to myself, "This game is so bad and Reggie's been so bad tonight, anyway, if they do one more stupid thing, I'm getting up and

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leaving.” So sure enough, there was some infield foul-ups and a wild pitch got a guy home, and I said to George, “Let’s get out of here.” So we got up and left. We’re walking out toward the parking lot. I had my little radio in my hand listening to it. Just as I put my key in the door I hear Reggie Jackson is now up to bat. Here comes the first pitch! And this loud roar begins swelling out to the parking lot. I looked at George and he looked at me, and we began laughing; I said to George, “There’s got to be a sermon illustration in there somewhere.” Patience. Patience.

Sometimes we leave, we check out, at the wrong times. You can check out of a home at the wrong time. You can check out of a relationship at the wrong time. Zechariah and Elizabeth didn’t check out. They just kept plodding on.

### **V. A fifth quality in a successful home is altruism.**

It’s kind of a million-dollar word that simply describes the concept that’s opposite of the spirit of “What do I get out of this?” Rather, altruism is something you do solely for others without getting any benefit yourself.

You say, “How do you find this as a characteristic of Zechariah and Elizabeth?” Because when Zechariah was in the holy place offering incense, which he would only do once in his whole lifetime, and some priests never even got that opportunity, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, “Your prayer has been answered.” There are some people who think he was praying for a son. Scripture doesn’t say that, since his wife was old at that moment, I would suspect he was not praying for a son. I would suspect that what he was praying for was the redemption of his nation, the saving of his nation.

It’s like when I come up to the pulpit to lead you in prayer on Sunday morning, I don’t pray for my own family needs. I pray for the needs of the whole body. Zechariah at that moment was representing all the people before God. He was praying for Israel. I think there’s a certain thing

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to be said about him and his life, that he's not just worrying about making ends meet, though that's a big thing, I know, when you're older; or just checking out and saying, "All that matters is my pension." But he was concerned for the next generation that was coming. He had a concern for his country and his people and he was out there praying and doing something for them. What a great quality, an admirable quality to build into a life and build into a home. Not just a self-centered "How can I fulfill my own desires?"

### **VI. The sixth quality in a successful home is children who are a joy and a delight.**

That's said of John the Baptist, "When he's born, he's going to be a joy and a delight to you."

There's so much violence against children today, whether the children are in the womb or outside the womb. It's a shame that many see children as an inconvenience, a nuisance, an interruption. God intended children to be a joy and a blessing. We need to pray that into existence and believe—even after they've long grown up and maybe they're not the joy and delight you've wanted them to be—and continue to pray that that seed which is sown will mature. Our workaday world judges a man by the success he has in his company rather than by his family relationships. As Christians, we have to fight against that.

I noticed in an obituary not ever was one word said about his family. It was all about the job he had held and what he did between these years and these years. But the family wasn't worthy of mention. We need to reverse that kind of thing. Other than giving my life to the Lord and marrying my wife, the most important thing that has ever happened to me is my children. Our children are a joy and a delight to our hearts. As parents, we need to keep the vision of what children will be, even when they may not act like it or deserve it. And to the children and young people that are here, other than pleasing God, the most important thing you can do in your life is be a joy and a delight to your parents. Kids, have you said to your mom and dad, "I really love

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you. I think you're great. You're the most wonderful mom (or dad).” Can you come out of your world now and then, come out of the stereo and records, and come out of the telephone and all the great things that are happening in school and all the clubs, can you come out of that and get into your parents' world every now and then, and put your arms around them and say, “I love you. I know you really care for me.” Can you show some special thoughtful consideration and encouragement to them? Parents go through a lot and they get discouraged too. We are so encouraged when you say something special to us. Be a joy and a delight to your parents.

**VII. The seventh quality of a successful home is children who have a goal of being great in the eyes of the Lord.**

John the Baptist was to be great in the eyes of the Lord. The only kind of greatness that counts is to be great in His eyes. No matter what vocation the child or the young person may choose to enter, the most important is to be great in the Lord's eyes. The Christian life involves playing for God, not playing for the spectators, not playing for the other members of the church—playing life for God. Being great in the eyes of the Lord.

**VIII. The eighth quality in a successful home is children who seek an above average commitment to God and to be filled with His Spirit.**

John the Baptist would never take wine or other fermented drink and was filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. There would be something special that would mark him, make him distinct; he would be tighter with the Lord.

I personally am alarmed at the growing problem of alcoholism and substance abuse among young people. I think, parents, if there is use of alcohol in your home, you need to ask yourself whether or not your example is going to prove to be a stumbling block to your children. I think that Christians in this day need to focus, not on how much can I do and still be a Christian, but

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upon how I can more effectively run the Christian race by getting rid of excess baggage that I don't need. If you want joy and relaxation in your life, get it from the Holy Spirit and not a chemical. That's the kind of joy and relaxation that really lasts.

John the Baptist was set apart in his commitment to God, unchallenged and unquestioned.

**IX. The ninth mark of a successful home is children who go forth with strength and power to prepare the way of the Lord.**

In fact, John would go in the strength and spirit and power of Elijah. He's going to emerge from that family as a powerful person. That's what we want to see happen in our homes: our children emerge with strength and power for life, power with God. Luke said that happened from the womb on. He was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb.

I love the practice of a small group of Swedish Christians that, when a child is born, ask the people that are attending the birth of the child— it's a midwife or doctors and nurses or whatever, "Please when the child is born do not speak. We want no speaking." It is their custom, when a child is born, that the father go to the child and that the first words a child ever hears in life are these words from his father's lips to his ears, "Jesus is Lord!" I don't want to get magical or mystical, but at the same time, I feel that there's a sort of directional emphasis we take with our children right from the womb. From that moment on, we need to be covering these children with our prayers and our love. If you came to Christ after the children were grown, from whatever time you came to Christ, begin giving those children to the Lord so that they might emerge with power and strength.

John was going to be raised as a contemporary of Herod the Great's son. John was going to have to stand up to him, like Elijah the prophet stood up to Ahab and Jezebel of old and had to say, "That's wrong!" And John the Baptist would have to say to Herod of Galilee and Herodias,

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“What you’re doing is wrong.” It takes courage to stand up for your convictions. Our young people today have a rough time standing up to pressure, especially pressure from their friends. We need, in the home, to provide an atmosphere of encouragement for our kids to grow in the Lord. We need to do it in the church as well.

I was struck in talking to Jerry this week. He was mentioning the fact that they had just completed the first practice of the junior high kids in their new choir. He said it was such a thrill to see these junior high kids, because they got up with such confidence. Not typical of junior high kids...but these kids had confidence. He said, “I realized that the reason they had such confidence is they’d been through our children’s program and ministry and they had already built that confidence up. So they’re way ahead in ministry.” I thought that was an important message I need to get across to parents. We need to forge a bond between you and us (the church). We’re not going to split the home up by having all kinds of things going every night. But there is an opportunity here, we want to join arms with you to help produce children that are strong and great in the Lord and we need your encouragement and backing, and you need our encouragement and backing to make these kids all they can be. I have never seen a church that is as filled with young people and children who are going to make the kind of contribution to God that are in this church. You should see what happens here on Wednesday night, what’s happening in the Sunday Schools and children’s churches and the youth group. There are young people and children here that are going to count for the Lord and they’re going to emerge with great power and strength. We need to birth them into existence with our prayers and support and our steady involvement by bringing our kids and being part of what they’re doing and being involved. We need to pray that this church will pass the torch, if Jesus tarries, to the next generation.

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**X. The tenth quality in a successful home is children who will bring reconciliation within their families and their country.**

In fact, John would turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous. Turning the hearts of the fathers. Probably Luke is talking about one of two things here: either the immediate fathers, the natural fathers, the children are going to be turned toward them; or the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the fathers of the faith—they're going to be reunited in having a common faith.

The need to turn hearts is evidence that hearts had been headed in the wrong direction. There's going to be reconciling. One of the most important works children can do is promote harmony within their family and harmony between their mom and dad. Reconciliation—homes of love—are part of preparing a people of the Lord.

Maybe you're a little bit like Zechariah. Maybe when you go through these ten qualities of a successful home with me, you say, "Wow! That's kind of heavy, pastor. I'm not sure we can come up to that." That's exactly like Zechariah felt when the angel brought him a word that he was going to bear a son. "I don't think that could happen." There's a need to put our life in the hands of God, to recognize that these qualities I've articulated are God's will for our homes. And all we need to do is give our hearts, agree with Him. With the ones that we don't see how we could ever possibly bring off, say, "Lord, I'll do the best I can. You'll have to take the rest. You can do it." We can see this happen in our homes.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's names themselves give us meaning regarding their life. Because Zechariah's name meant, "God remembers," and Elizabeth's name meant, "My God is an oath," or, "My God is the absolutely faithful one." So here was this older couple whose names, even though they were barren, meant "My God remembers" and "My God is absolutely faithful."

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Your situation may strike you today as extremely tough and you don't see how you're going to make it through this day, let alone this week or this year, or how your home is going to keep together. My God remembers and my God is the absolutely faithful one. Put your trust in Him. Let Him bring you through. Let Him make a successful home. I call upon us to dedicate our homes to the Lord.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we thank You for this moment that we have to pray. Maybe there's a husband and a wife sitting next to one another and they haven't spoken to one another in twenty-four hours or a week in any kind of a meaningful way. I ask, Lord, that You would, in this service, bring a kind of peace, Your own peace to their hearts. I ask Lord for single persons who are sitting here, some of whom have gone through very wrenching experiences in their family backgrounds, through the breakup of marriages and the like, that You would help them to know that You are the God who is the absolutely faithful one. That even though people around them have not been faithful to them, Your Word is sure, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." I pray for the children here. I pray that the children will really have the courage to come up and put their arms around their mom and their dad and hug them and say, "I love you." Maybe older children here who have parents somewhere else in the nation and haven't really kept close to them or realized what was going on in their own hearts would just reach out and bless their parents and show them, in special ways, that they're loved. We dedicate our homes to You, Lord. We dedicate our lives to You. I ask that You would bring wholeness to every one of our homes; that Your life and Your Spirit would triumph in them through Christ. Amen.