

Family Messages and Life Vows

God places the lonely in families. Ps 68:6. Family is an important concept in Scripture and in life. Our family gives us our first sense of safety in the world, our first notions of justice, of belonging and of identity. We begin to know who we are, what others are like and how we should live in the context of our childhood home. While many families do a wonderful job of raising youngsters with the godly concepts of truth, love and limits, the world is a broken place, and all of us carry some messages with us which are not God's untainted truth. We all 'do life' using some coping mechanisms learned early which may not be appropriate for adulthood. The purpose of this handout is to help you pursue the messages you internalized as a child, the life vows you made as a result and to wisely determine if those are good and necessary values for you now.

As a first step, prayerfully list all the powerful people in your early life. Use the following lines to list five to ten people who had a *formative influence* on you. The strongest influences often come before the age of 12, so include your earliest important caretakers, relatives or friends, positive or negative. Use another sheet of paper if you run out of room. After you write each person's name or title, write a few words which describe their character and a sentence or two about the ways they interacted with you.

Formative People

▶ _____

▶ _____

▶ _____



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▶ _____

In addition to the people who formed our character in childhood, we all have formative events in our story which shaped our thinking. Prayerfully make a list of the five most important memories you carry from your childhood and some lessons these events taught you.

Formative Events

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In your "Formative People" and "Formative Events" you have the raw material to be able to cull some of your life messages. What were the messages which these people and events meant to communicate? What did they actually communicate? Most of these messages are unspoken, and you may have to step back and take an objective look at what you think *someone else* might have learned from the same event or person. Take some time alone with God over the course of several days and ask Him to guide you as you consider the messages about yourself and life that you carry with you. Some negative examples might be, "don't talk about your needs," "you are not worth someone else's time" or "emotion is weakness." Some positive examples might include, "you are smart," "we are never all alone in life," or "giving to others brings joy."

Examples which may cut either way include “it’s important to be cool,” “education is essential,” “if you want something done you have to do it yourself,” or “our family is loyal to one another.” Write the messages you identify on the following lines.

Family Messages



In addition to our family messages, and sometimes because of them, we all tend to make commitments about the way we are going to live our lives. Those commitments, or life vows, may be conscious or unconscious. One well-known example comes from the film, *Gone With the Wind* where Scarlett O’Hara vows, “As God is my witness... I’m going to live through this, and when it’s all over, I’ll never be hungry again. No, nor any of my folk. If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill. As God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.” Your vows may not be that dramatic, but they may include things like, “I will never expose myself to the risk of ridicule” or “I will never let anyone see me cry” or “I will never owe anything to anyone.” More positive vows might include, “I will always make time for relationships” or “I won’t have sex before marriage.” Review your formative people and events as well as your life messages. Then ask God (and maybe even a trusted friend) to help you identify any life vows you may be living with. Record them on the following lines.

Life Vows

Now that you have identified some of your life messages and vows, you should take time to evaluate them. Which of them are healthy ways of thinking and behaving? Which of them line up with Scripture? Which of them may have helped you as a child but have been outgrown? Which were never good ways of loving God, self and others? As long as you live, you will continue the process of becoming something new. *And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. 1 Cor. 15:49.* Now that you've identified some patterns from the past, you have a conscious choice about whether you continue to practice those patterns or begin to change them. Use the lines below to journal about what you've learned. It might also be helpful for you to discuss your life vows and messages with a counselor, spouse or trusted friend.

May the Lord richly bless your meditations and your growth. *Grace and peace be yours in abundance. 1 Peter 1:2.*