

Text: John 18:36

Theme: The Church and Social Reform

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Did you happen to notice Benjamin's Scafidi's report to the nation on what divorce and unwed childbearing costs the United States taxpayer? Benjamin Scafidi is an associate professor in the School of Business at Georgia College and State University.

He headed up some extensive research to find out what the government is paying to compensate for the weaknesses of fractured families.

It is well known that stable families, meaning mom, dad, and the kids living together, are the best and cheapest way to bring children to responsible adulthood. When those families break up or are never formed in the first place, the single parent needs a lot of extra help. She or he cannot do everything for the children that a married couple can do. So the government has to help out, so that the children are fed and clothed and educated, hopefully in a manner that will prepare them for responsible adulthood.

The help comes in the form of welfare checks to put food on the table. It comes in the form of day care and school programs that are supposed to compensate for the absent parent.

Government programs try to make up for the basic education that a child would otherwise receive at home. They provide smaller classrooms and special programs to help disturbed children. They pay for security devices so that troubled children do not threaten the safety of other children in the school. Then there are summer programs and after-school programs to keep the children safe and occupied. And all this costs money that finally comes from the taxpayer.

But, in spite of the best that wise and caring people can do, these programs don't always accomplish their intended purpose. Sometimes they are only marginally successful, so that many of the children fail to reach the goal of responsible adulthood. Some continue to repeat the problems of their parents, while others turn to a life of crime. Again the government has to step in and repair the damage that results from fractured families.

Additional police provide partial protection from these angry children who are now teen-agers and young adults. The court imposes penalties upon those who are apprehended. Parole officers and prisons put those penalties into effect, all at taxpayer expense, including the cost of capital punishment.

This does not mean that every single parent is a burden upon society. There are many who have the strength of character and support from family and church so that their children escape the forces that can lead to their destruction. And these parents deserve special praise for doing alone what is often more than enough for married parents. But taken as a whole, the children who

require extra attention from government resources come mostly from single-parent families. And the number of those families continues to increase, with no end in sight.

Professor Scafidi, along with his colleagues, wanted to draw attention to this huge problem which is consistently being swept under the rug, as if single-parent families were the expected and acceptable standard. He reasoned that, if the cost to taxpayers could be determined with some reasonable accuracy, the people and their politicians would begin to pay attention and address the source of the problem instead of just continuing to throw money at it.

Of course, in such matters it is not always easy to distinguish cause and effect. In order for the report to be credible, the researchers used the lowest acceptable estimates, so that they would not undermine their conclusions by exaggerating the government expense. The conservative bottom line was this: Fractured families are costing the taxpayer \$112 billion dollars a year, \$112 billion dollars that might otherwise have been used to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

It is one thing to identify a problem. It's something else to do something about it. In this case the obvious solution to the problem is to strengthen marriage, so that more and more children will get what they need at home, instead of getting it through expensive government programs. And some states have done just that. They are setting aside millions to support efforts to strengthen marriage. If these efforts are just ten percent effective, they would save the government millions that it doesn't have to spend to help fractured families.

It's still too early to determine the successfulness of this initiative, but the logic is inescapable. Fractured families are costing the taxpayers billions annually. If fractured families could be turned into stable families, there would be less taxes to pay.

And what has been the impact of this profound study? None whatsoever, as far as I can see. Except for a significant editorial by Patrick McIlheran, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel ignored the report completely. The cost of sewage disposal is front page news, but the sewage that flows into and out of broken homes is ignored by the media, in spite of the stench that pollutes the heart of the community. I was not surprised.

Nor do I have much hope for the noble solution that has been proposed. Efforts to strengthen marriage are commendable, but those millions cannot compete with the billions that are spent to promote material and sensual self-gratification. The blessed institution of marriage requires sacrifice and commitment to your spouse. We live in an environment that detests sacrifice and forgiveness and faithfulness. Since the departure of the Cosby Show, television seldom portrays stable families in a positive light. There is still good stuff on TV, but you have to look for it and resist the attractiveness of sex and violence that demands a viewer's attention while you are channel surfing.

What can the government do to reduce the flow of unhappy children from fractured families? I don't know. I know of some who have tried. James Dobson of Focus on the Family has some great ideas on marriage and raising children. Tony Evans of the Urban Alternative applies the same truths, especially for the African-American community. And maybe these people have

done some good. Things could have been worse without them. But their voice is a candle in the windstorm of self-gratification that permeates our society.

Dobson and Evans have tried to get the government to do more for the family. They have spoken to congressmen and presidents. They are Calvinists, and by this time you have learned that Calvinists would like very much to have the government enforce the laws of the church. But we are Lutherans, and Lutherans look for solutions in a different place.

When Jesus was on trial before Pilate, he was accused of being a king who was opposed to the rule of the Roman emperor. Pilate wanted to hear what Jesus would say about that. He asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

In reply, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

Under other circumstances, the conversation would have been comical. A helpless prisoner, whose life was subject to the whims of the governor, claiming to be a king, a king with people who were under his authority, who listened to his voice and obeyed him.

Pilate could not have known, could not have believed, that Jesus was true God whose power had not only healed the sick and raised the dead, but had also created the universe. His apparent weakness was only a part of the process by which he would sacrifice himself to pay for the sins of a whole world of sinners. And by that sacrifice he would earn the humble allegiance of the millions who would come to believe in him.

Jesus had authority, not only by virtue of his divine power, but also by virtue of his compelling love which makes willing servants out of those who by faith know him to be their Savior from sin and hell.

St. Paul put it this way, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

We have seen what our sins did to Jesus. We have seen him suffering in our place. The sweet, juicy sins that are so attractive to our sinful nature lose their attractiveness. We died along with our Substitute and thus we are dead to the temptations that used to entice us. Instead of finding pleasure in self-gratification, we find pleasure in pleasing Jesus. He has authority over us, not because of his power to enforce his laws, but because of his amazing love which led him to sacrifice himself for us.

Our King wears no golden crown. He wears a crown of thorns. But he is nevertheless our King. No, Jesus servants did not fight to prevent his arrest by the Jews. That would have interfered with the mission his Father had given him, the mission of paying for our sins. He told Peter to put away his sword. His victory would not be accomplished by force of arms, but rather by force of his compelling love.

What was true in the court of Pontius Pilate is still true today, also when it comes to repairing the damage done to and through fractured families. The lust that leads to unwed pregnancies can not be eliminated by law passed by congress, but it can be overpowered by the love of Jesus that inspires obedience to him. The forgiveness required for stable marriages cannot be dictated by the government, but it can be forced upon us by the forgiveness which Jesus earned for us.

The process is often weak and ineffective, especially in those who have little contact with the Means of Grace, the Word of God in the Bible and in the Sacraments. There are fractured families in the church. By some accounting they are just as common inside the church as outside of it. The selfishness that fractures families still resides in the hearts of those who know they have been redeemed by the sacrificial love of Christ. So in frustration many turn to the law to accomplish what the Gospel has not been doing fast enough.

We should not despise these noble efforts to make our environment more supportive of stable families. If the government wants me to teach marriage skills to the unchurched, I am more than ready to help.

But laws cannot eliminate the lust for sex and retaliation. The real solution lies in the love of God which changes hearts of stone into hearts of flesh that can be touched by the will of God and the needs of others. I will support legislation designed to help families, by I will not abandon the preaching of the Gospel. For it is through the Gospel that I have been crucified with Christ, so that I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

When we live by faith in the Son of God, we are strengthened to work at building strong families, in our home, in our church, and in our communities.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Have mercy upon us who have sacrificed the welfare of our families to satisfy our selfish desires. Grant success to all the noble and generous efforts to contain the damage done to and by fractured families. Above all, grant faith to us and especially to those whom we love, that faith in the Son of God may compel us to respond to his love with unselfish love for others, to provide the strength that families need to live together in peace and harmony. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

