

## "FAMILY GIFTS"

### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago one of the members of our Church passed on to me a capsule summary of Edward Gibbon's reasons for "the decline and fall of the Roman Empire" in his monumental historical study by that title. There are five of them, and it takes no preacher's exposition to point out their alarming relevance for our time. Listen to the historian's reasons why the vaunted power of Rome collapsed:

1. The undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis for human society.
2. Higher and higher taxes; the spending of public money for free bread and circuses for the populace.
3. The mad craze for pleasure; sports becoming every year more exciting, more brutal, more immoral.
4. The building of great armaments when the real enemy was within - the decay of individual responsibility.
5. The decay of religion; faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life, losing power to guide the people.

Every one of them could be the basis for a sermon, but I ask you to ponder the first of them as the beginning of this sermon - "The undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis for human society". That this applies to America in 1975 as well as to Rome fifteen centuries ago needs little documentation.

The institutions of marriage and the family are under attack, and are often ridiculed by some as antique and archaic. And even in the homes of those who are outraged by such heresy as that, there are severe stresses and strains at work which make many a marriage fragile and many a home insecure. From the modern attack on marriage itself - to the high incidence of divorce and desertion - to the tensions within homes that maintain a semblance of unity, there is, I feel, valid cause for concern about what is happening to the American home.

### COMMERCIALISM OF MOTHER'S DAY

One aspect of the problem is symbolized by the commercialism that accompanies Mother's

Day.

We have been exhorted to demonstrate our devotion to Mother by the purchase of furs or furniture, flowers or perfume. Love to Mother is often equated with the dollar sign, and the not-so-subtle suggestion is that the more dollars you spend, the more devotion you show. Which, of course, is symptomatic of a prevalent mood in our homes - the idea that we can always buy the things that matter most, and that money is the medicine for any malady. "If your family is drifting apart" read the ad, "Buy a television set". I wanted to buy equal space and retort, "If your family is drifting apart, throw out a television set and start talking to each other".

The financial undergirding of a home is important, and it is unrealistic to pretend otherwise. For money is more than money - it is food that we eat; it is education for our children; it is books and music for our souls; it is help for

love, not because he feels some heavy sense of oughtness.

One Sunday morning last Fall, a little girl sat here in Church with her parents. She was too young to understand much of the sermon, and she wriggled and squirmed a bit throughout the service. But maybe she heard one word that kept creeping into the service that morning more than usual. At any rate, she took a pencil out of the rack in the pew and on the front of the bulletin she wrote a note to her mother. It said, "I Love you" and signed her name. She passed it to her mother who then wrote in reply "I Love you, too". The mother shared it with me and it seemed to me one of the loveliest acts of worship that could take place in the House of God. In a way, it is a miniature of what worship is all about - love received and love relayed - love from God - love to God - and love to man.

In that spirit, Mother's Day or Father's Day can be a healthy, meaningful observance. And we best express our love and gratitude for all they meant - not by some calendar-prompted gift, but by spontaneous love and thoughtfulness that has no particular day or season, and even after our parents are gone, by the manner and meaning of our lives.

CLOSING Have you ever stopped to consider what a beautiful tribute Jesus paid to His home and His parents. He moved out from that home, lived His own life, but when He came to describe the God to whom He was consistently closer, perhaps than anyone in all of history, the God of wisdom, and justice, and love, the best human term that Jesus could find to suggest the nature of that God was in terms of an earthly parent - "Father". And it could well have been "Mother".

Think about the gifts that were given in both directions in that family of Nazareth. Think, too, about the real and lasting gifts that are given in our families. In these closing moments, think, too....

PRAYER O God, who has set us to live together in families, forgive us that so often these nearest and dearest relationships become all snarled up -

from busyness or selfishness or tarnished values.

Help us to use this day again to see the love that has been given us, love without any price-tag and to respond in priceless ways, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen