

**LESSONS FOR TODAY FROM PURITAN FAMILY  
LIFE**



# **The Puritans**

**Transcript of a talk by**

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## **LESSONS FROM PURITAN FAMILY LIFE**

A few months ago, one day I was talking to my wife about the Puritans. I said, there is something very remarkable about them. Whatever they were preaching about, talking about, they always brought it back in the end to how does a husband treat his wife? How does he treat his children? How does he behave? They were the deepest of all theologians on doctrine and experience, but if they had a discourse on predestination, well, how does this affect the way that people who believe in predestination act in their own home and in their own family? Remarkably, the very next day I received your kind invitation to speak on this very subject:

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Remarkably again, the very next day I was reading Dr. Owen, Dr. Owen who is counted the prince of theologians. At the end of one of his discourses he said (in substance), “It is alright going to all these services and listening to all these sermons that are preached, but all these sermons that you are listening to don’t do you any good at all if your next door neighbour does not see the difference in you!” So the vital point is that the Puritans strongly contended for the effect of the truth and the knowledge of Christ in every single detail of a believer’s life, and especially in his family life.

I quote from a little book published some time ago called *The Genius of Puritanism* and the author said this:

‘Every area of life came under the influence of God and the guidance of his Word. Every task, whether professional or manual, was done to the glory of God and with an eye to His will. Every relationship, business or personal, was regularly to abide by spiritual principles. In a word, the great business of godliness dominated the believer’s ambitions and called for all his energies.’

I feel that is a very good summary and a very good starting point for us.

Who were the Puritans? May I say this is not going to be a historical lecture though I suppose for just a few moments at the start I ought to try to answer this question: Who are these Puritans that we are talking about? What do we mean? We often talk about the Huguenots, the Covenanters and the Puritans and make all kinds of claims for them and statements about them, but do we really know what we mean?

So who were the Puritans? This is not a very easy question to answer. The name ‘Puritan’ was first given to them by their enemies; a term of scorn. Of course, I am going to have to be exceedingly brief and general because many books have been written on this subject: ‘Who were the Puritans?’ To put it as simply as I can, they were a most godly group of people who lived roughly from the middle of the 1500s to the end of the 1600s. Puritanism really started like this. In the reign of the famous Queen Elizabeth I, the godly felt that the Reformation in the Church of England had not gone far enough. Many of them had been to Geneva. They met Calvin. They knew what was

going on on the continent and they thought that the English Reformation in the Church of England had stopped short and they wanted to purify the Church and then to revive it further. It really started with the 1559 prayer book of Queen Elizabeth I.

Now working like that, hoping for a difference in the national Church, never really met with success. Queen Elizabeth hated the Puritans but later when James I became King, the Puritans had great hopes as he came from Scotland. But he again opposed the Puritans. Remember that he had a conference meeting with them and the only thing they got was the Authorised Version of the Bible. By now this movement of the Spirit of God in England was affecting many people; the desire that the Church of God should be subject to God's holy word.

Well, things began to happen. Of course, the Pilgrim Fathers felt they could no longer settle in this country. They were meeting with no success, only persecution, and so they fled to America and set up worship, Puritan worship, as they liked under God in America. But little groups began to appear, Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists. In the reign of Charles I the Puritans fared even worse. Persecution – William Laud, the Archbishop, sending them to prison – mutilating them. But, more and more, Puritanism began to gain influence in Parliament, among the common people, among the nobility. In the end there was that wonderful Westminster Assembly of godly divines, Puritans and people like Samuel Rutherford from Scotland, seeking to reform the Church, to have different articles, to have a different constitution, to have a different method of worship. If ever the

Puritan movement flourished it was when Cromwell ruled this Country.

Of course, with the return of Charles II, the most appalling persecution took place on all that would not agree on every detail in the Church of England prayer book and worship, and 2000 of the best ministers were ejected from the Church of England for their principles. They became the leaders of the Puritan movement. In a sense Puritanism died out politically and ecclesiastically, but it continued doctrinally, theologically, in families; and these 2000 ministers became the backbone of Puritanism, or godliness, in this country.

I have tried to be as brief and simple as I can, though many, many lectures have been given and many, many books have been written on this. The main thing was the godliness that prevailed, the grace, the work of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the best known Puritans were John Bunyan, who suffered for his Puritanism, Dr. Owen, and perhaps lesser known names like Manton, Flavell, Sibbes, Goodwin and others. I don't know if some of you here do read the Puritans. They were the second generation of Protestantism. The first generation; Calvin, Luther – in England; Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer and so on – they were establishing doctrine, the difference from the Church of Rome, the evils of Roman Catholicism. Now the second generation, the godly Puritans, sought to apply the truth to every aspect of church life, business life, family life and everything. I think we can fairly say that the days of the Puritans were the time when real godliness flourished more in England than ever before or since.

## **THE FAMILY**

Well now to come to the Puritan family. Let me say that what you often read about the Puritans is just a caricature. I mean grumpy, scowling faces and big black hats, women with their little white collars and long grey dresses – that is a complete falsehood and a complete caricature. The Puritan family was a most loving family. The ministers insisted upon it. They preached sermons from the words at the close of Ephesians 5 concerning husbands and wives. I think sometimes people confuse the Puritans. In Victorian England, sadly under the name of religion, there was some cruelty of fathers to children and overbearing husbands to their wives, but the Puritan family was a most loving family.

Under God the Puritans established Christian marriage, the Christian family and the Christian home. In the middle Ages when Romanism prevailed, marriage was looked upon as the second best. There were monks and nuns; that was the ideal. Marriage was very much a second best and lots of things were scorned upon and spoken of as if not just right. Things in Christian homes nowadays are just taken for granted which were really the discovery of the Puritans as they sought to bring family life under the influence of the Word of God.

## **MARRIAGE**

Marriage, they emphasised the preciousness of marriage. A Puritan expression: “Marriage is the sugar that sweetens all duties”. They were the first people, which may surprise you, who brought in the idea of romantic marriage, romantic love.

The Puritans had this very high view of Christian marriage. It was scriptural. It was to the honour and glory of God. It was beautiful. It was the foundation of the Christian family. The Puritans believed that the father was the head of the house. They believed in accordance with Ephesians 5 what the wife's position should be, but very much authority, with the children, the concerns of the home, was allowed to the Puritan wife.

Let me give you a Puritan quotation: "Before man had any other calling he was called to be a husband. First man must choose his wife and then he must love his choice. The man and wife are partners like the two oars in a boat." Let me give you just a little instance (which may make you smile) to show that Puritan husbands and wives in their relationships were not stern and stark; there was this loving romantic element. I am quoting from a sermon by William Gouge, the author of a commentary on Hebrews. He had a book of sermons on Christian marriage which was often given to newly married people. Now this is what Dr. Gouge said. "That when the children are present, when the servants are present, when there are visitors in the home, it is not really wise for husband and wife before these others to address one and another as 'sweeting, or ducks, or chicks or pigsnie'!" The obvious implication is that when servants and children and strangers were **not** present, and when the Puritan husband and wife are alone, that they **did** address one and another as sweeting, chicks and ducks and pigsnie!

It might be interesting to you how girls and boys got married. As they were getting to know one another, there was a period of courting. They were not arranged marriages, and the emphasis

was that they married someone whom they loved. They were taught it was good to ask advice. Of course, there must be much prayer and warning against the unequal yoke. The first thing there ought to be is a loving relationship. The Puritan term was “the love was the glue”. Now there was something different from today. There was a contract of espousals, much more emphasis on the engagement. It had to be done publicly. The girl and boy had to stand together, hold hands and make a promise that they would be married before various witnesses. This was publicly announced three times in the congregation. The marriage; friends were there and it was emphasised that they should all be dressed up and wear their best clothes, and the Puritan pastor used to preach a short sermon. Then there was a feast and the feast was usually at the bridegroom’s home. None of the present day nonsense was permitted but the bride and bridegroom and the family and the guests used to enjoy themselves with “witty questions and doubtful riddles” (whatever that means).

## **CHILDREN**

Bringing up children, the Puritan father and mother felt this was a great privilege and a great responsibility. There was the strictness. There was much firmness in obedience to the Word of God. But the emphasis was love and a warning against any kind of harshness. To quote again: “The desire of Puritan parents bringing up their children was under God’s blessing to establish God’s glorious kingdom in the home, and above all they sought and prayed for the salvation of their children”.

Idleness was abhorrent in Puritan times and idleness was abhorrent in Puritan families.

The work they were going to do, for which the children were brought up, was always spoken of as a “calling.” If a man was a farmer, that was not his job, it was not his work, it was his calling. If he was a builder, it was not his job, it was not his work, it was his calling. There was that emphasis, of course, with the Puritans themselves.

But in bringing up their children and above everything else, the emphasis of the Puritan pastors and the godly was a gracious example.

How did the father and the mother behave before their children? Another Puritan expression (and I think that we can learn from these things; this is really my point this afternoon): “Holiness begins at home”.

## **EDUCATION**

Puritan education; I realise this is a point that people are interested in and would like know about. I must say I find this rather difficult. You read books about Puritan education but obviously some of the Puritans were very poor, and some other Puritan fathers and mothers could not read or write; they were completely illiterate. Then there was terrible persecution. Some of them were in prison. There was the Civil War raging with all its ravages, so I find it difficult to get a proper idea of Puritan education.

First, there were some kind of schools called Dame schools, but there was no national education in place. There were grammar schools. Some of the Puritan pastors would give instruction and, of course, there were the Dissenting Academies, which were academies which grew up round some of the Puritan congregations. It was said that the education there was, was better than Oxford or Cambridge! People like Dr. Doddridge had famous academies, scattered over England.

However, these tended more to be for training ministers or perhaps for older young people over the age of eighteen.

Generalising, the Puritan fathers and mothers especially wanted their children to learn to read, so that they could read the Scriptures and be able to read good books. In all the teaching, however secular it was, it always had a Christian bent. For instance: when girls and boys were learning the alphabet, there would be a little piece: A, and then followed; “In Adam’s fall we sin all,” and going on like that until Z: Z for Zacchaeus. “Zacchaeus he did climb the tree the Lord to see.” Secular education was always with a religious tinge to it – a Christian bent.

No doubt you have come across this – Dutch tiles; in 17th century England many Puritan homes had Dutch tiles by the fireplace which had pictures and scenes from Scripture. The famous Dr. Doddridge, our hymn writer, his early convictions and early spiritual influence were from the Dutch tiles in his home and his mother pointing to the Dutch tiles and telling them the stories.

One thing especially in Puritan education was catechising the children. They felt very, very strongly on the subject of catechisms. I suppose they would have the 1643 Westminster Catechism. Interestingly, the Scottish Churches and the Dutch Churches, even today, feel exceedingly strongly on this point, that children should be catechised. For instance Westminster question 1, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ Answer: ‘The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.’ For instance; what is justification? ‘Justification is the act of God’s free grace whereby he accounteth us righteous only for the sake of His Son Jesus Christ’. With Strict Baptists, catechising never seems to have been popular. William Gadsby did draw up a catechism, (I don’t think he was at his best in that catechism). I think it’s the pendulum swing there has always been: this fear (and rightly so) in our Churches against a head knowledge religion. I think that’s why we have reared away from the Puritan idea of catechising – not wanting children just to know the truth in their heads.

## **FAMILY WORSHIP**

Family worship – there was tremendous emphasis on this in the Puritan family, not just morning and evening Bible reading and prayer as we have, but a long time spent at it. There would be the reading, there would be the prayer, the father would explain the passage, and there would be teaching. Children would be asked questions. They would be encouraged to ask questions. A Psalm would be sung. Then this would be repeated again in the evening. It was felt very, very important every day of the week, this family worship morning and evening, and it could not be

disturbed. Reading the life of Dr. Watts (the hymn writer) when he was a boy, he remembered that if any visitor or a tradesman came to the house, however important, the answer always was, “The master is at prayer. The master cannot be disturbed”.

Now I have a question which has puzzled me: How did they manage it? The only answer I can get: the families got up exceedingly early – 4 o’clock in the morning or 5 o’clock at the very latest. But family prayers, family worship had not to be hurried.

As we are going through these things today, I think we can pick up all kinds of things in which we generally are seen to be easier, coming short of the very high standard the Puritans set.

## **THE SABBATH**

The last special thing I will mention: The Sabbath Day. The Lord’s Day, they used to call it: “the Queen of all the days of the week”. They used to call it “the market day of souls”. Sabbath keeping was exceedingly strict but the emphasis was ‘joy’, not what most people’s idea of the Puritans is. The Sabbath was the great day of joy. They approached it with joy. It was a joy to go to the House of God. There was the morning and evening family worship as usual but more time was spent on it and the Puritans had a custom that Saturday evening should be kept very quiet. Saturday evening should be a preparation for the Holy Sabbath, devoted to the Lord, which was so important. I understand if it was communion Sabbath, then they felt almost the whole of the Saturday should be kept exceedingly quiet, much time for prayer and much time meditating.

When the family returned from the services of the house of God, the dinner table was always the scene of speaking about the morning service. The Puritans generally at most meals times abhorred gossip and idle conversation. On the Sabbath it had to be godly, even with the children, at the meals times, and the children however young were asked what the text had been and what the minister said about the text. This extreme importance in Puritan England, the whole of the Sabbath, the whole of the Sunday, every bit of it had to be devoted to the Lord. When they came home from the service that was not the end. What could the children remember? The father would ask the children questions about the service and did they understand it, could they remember it, did they know what it meant, and the children were encouraged to ask their father and their mother questions about what had been said – the points that they liked, the points where they could not understand what things meant.

Now in closing, the godly Puritans loved the truth, the doctrines of free and sovereign grace. They loved the Saviour. Have you read perhaps their greatest book, John Owen's, *The Glory of Christ*? But concerning the Puritan family, I came across this word 'totality'. It was that absolutely everything must be subject to Scripture, God's holy will, for the honour and Glory of his Name. And this, that in their home, the Lord Jesus Christ in all things might have the pre-eminence.

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