

The Family Code

by Matt Sprenger

Code - [kohd] a conventionalized set of principles, rules, or expectations: *a code of behavior*. (*World English Dictionary*) c.1300, from Old French *code* "system of laws," from Latin *codex*, earlier *caudex* "book, book of laws," lit. "tree trunk," hence, wooden tablet for writing.

I've heard it once said that the more relationship you have, the less need for rules. As a parent, though, I realize that my kids need to understand expectations. They thrive in them. As time goes on and they (and we) age, we have less need for a lot of rules. Trust deepens. Respect grows. Love overshadows all. They desire to please God and us. We desire to see them grow into the young men and women that God wants them to be. Rules get replaced over time with convictions - time-tested, trust-dependent, God-centered. These are the convictions for what the Chi Alpha family looks like...

The Family Code

March together.

Fight for, not against.

Stoop low, so someone else can rise.

Choose unselfishly for the highest good of God and His kingdom.

Give grace.

Abandon all masks.

March together. (Common Cause)

*Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

Four Hobbits, two men, a wizard, a dwarf, and an elf. When J.R.R. Tolkien created Middle-Earth and *The Lord of the Rings* he fashioned beings of disparate types, characters, and strengths. To save Middle-Earth from the coming darkness, these beings have to march together. They are called the Fellowship of the Ring. Their common cause was to destroy the One Ring of power which was to be used by the Dark Lord to subjugate them all.

Chi Alpha is a fellowship of people that have come to believe that there is really something at stake. There really is an eternal battle and the souls of young men and women are at stake, on our own campus and beyond. We cannot just look out for ourselves. We may not have the same personalities, but we are governed by the same mission: Reconciling students to Christ...

transforming the university, the marketplace and the world. This will only happen if we march together.

Fight for, not against. (Loyalty/Commitment)

The greatest struggle Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring encountered would not be from without. It would be from within. In order to accomplish their mission, races of beings that had historically been at odds could no longer fight against one another. They had to know that their backs would be covered by the members of the Fellowship. They had to fight for one another. If the Dark Lord could keep them fighting *against* one another, before they would ever begin to fight *for* one another, he would have already won.

Ephesians 6 details our spiritual armor (6:10-20). Contextually the entire book of Ephesians repeatedly discusses relationships, including the great mystery that Jesus was endeavoring to accomplish through the Cross - the mystery of "together." Jews and Gentiles would be "heirs *together*...", members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus" (3:6). Even as Paul outlines who we are (individually and collectively) in the first three chapters, he explains how we live that out in the last three. He gives specific relationship examples (husband/wife, father/children, master/slave), and then he shares the armor. Much of the "day of evil" that will come will be meant to destroy the relationships and community in Christ that God has brought together. That's the avenue through which God works - His body, His people! And that's probably why there is no armor for the back. That is our role, even in prayer. But if, when the day of evil comes, we can get our eyes upon other people (flesh and blood), Satan will have already won. Fight for one another, not against one another.

Stoop low, so someone else can rise. (Honor)

At the end of the last Lord of the Rings movie, the Dark Lord has been defeated, the One Ring has been destroyed, and peace has been re-established in Middle Earth. Aragorn, a member of the Fellowship, has rightly been placed on the throne of Gondor. He and his new wife have just been crowned and the four hobbits that were part of the Fellowship, four beings of humble, plain, and unassuming state, begin to bow before this king and queen. Aragorn stops them, and bows before these small creatures, these halflings. The entire city, all gathered for coronation, follows suit in a gracious act of honor for the courage and valor of these four hobbits.

It is a fitting response to how they have lived, fought, and sacrificed. This one act followed repeated acts by one hobbit, Frodo, who led the way. He constantly honored Aragorn. Repeatedly in how he acted and spoke to Aragorn he called out of Aragorn his kingly legacy and destiny. I think it's doubtful that Aragorn would have risen to be king without Frodo's simple ways of honoring him throughout their quest.

But honor is a hard task. If we stoop, someone else will get attention. If we stoop, someone else's gifts and abilities may be recognized, or may grow, while ours may go unnoticed. But we remember John the Baptist, perhaps the most widely (or wildly) known Rabbi pointing to Jesus and saying, "He must become greater; I must become less." We also remember Jesus humbling himself to become human, and then humbling himself to wash the disciples' feet, and then humbling himself to death, even death on a Cross. Stooping low, so others can rise is in our spiritual DNA. It was modeled by our King. May honor mark your way.

Choose unselfishly for the highest good of God and His kingdom. (Love)

Every non-hobbit member of the Fellowship was more powerful than Frodo. They were more gifted, more able. They were all better warriors. Perhaps any of them would have been a better choice to carry the ring. But Frodo was the Ring-Bearer. When their quest to destroy the One

Ring began, they marched together out of commitment to their cause. Over time they began to appreciate one another deeply, and true love for one another was born. This was modeled repeatedly in their willingness to sacrifice themselves and the ways of their race for the good of the Fellowship and the Quest. Men serve hobbits. The most antagonistic pair, a dwarf and an elf, become the closest of friends. The highest good of the cause was served in basic acts of unselfish love towards one another.

This is counter to our culture. Our culture has a mentality that says, *"I deserve to have."* It may be to have a certain status, respect, food, relationship, or whatever. The Gospel preaches a love mentality that says, *"I desire to give."* The members of the fellowship slowly made this transition. God is love and He rules His kingdom on the basis of His love. He acts out of that love towards all people. Our service to Him may be called an unselfish act, but the reality is that His love is so great that He blesses us even through our loving others. Choosing unselfishly for the highest good of God and His kingdom is lived out in loving our brothers and sisters... following Jesus' New Commandment, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). We bear the mark of the Kingdom (and God answers the "your Kingdom come" prayer), when we choose to unselfishly love one another.

Give grace. (Forgiveness/no bitterness)

The Fellowship is broken. Boromir, one of the 2 men that are part of the Fellowship, has attempted to take the ring from Frodo. Frodo keenly escapes the warrior Boromir just as an evil army of the Dark Lord attacks. Boromir fights valiantly, but is struck down.

When Aragorn (the only other human of the fellowship) hears the horn of the desperate Boromir, they run to him, only to find him dying. Boromir does not boast of his valor in death, nor does Aragorn accuse him of evil. Perhaps because he can discern Aragorn's forgiving spirit, Boromir admits his sin, as if the future king were also a priest hearing his last confession: "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," he said. "I am sorry. I have paid".

Boromir does not mean that he has recompensed for his dreadful attempt to seize the Ring. He means that he has paid the terrible price of breaking trust with Frodo. In almost his last breath, therefore, Boromir confesses that he has failed.

Aragorn will not let Boromir die in the conviction that his whole life has been ruined by a momentary act of madness—even though it was prompted by Boromir's arrogant confidence in his own courage. Rather than pointing to his terrible guilt in betraying Frodo and the fellowship, Aragorn absolves the hero by emphasizing the real penance Boromir has performed in fighting evil to the end, even when no one was present to witness his deed: "'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!'"

(from an article by Ralph Wood, a professor at Baylor University)

We will all face evil. We will all face disappointment. We will all face distrust. And we may face that amongst our brothers and sisters. What will our response be? Forgiveness is at the core of our faith. Jesus modeled it better than any...even in the midst of dying on the Cross - "Father, forgive them." We must follow the way of our Master. We must be ready to always give grace. Forgiveness must be our constant companion (not 7 times, but 7*70 times). Bitterness must be our bitter enemy. There is no greater root to destroy the life of a family than bitterness. It clings, it binds, it holds. And it will not let go, until we let it go, forgive, and give grace.

Abandon all masks. (Honesty, naked & unashamed)

What is one of the astonishing aspects of the hobbit Frodo is his authenticity. He is simply real. He is quick to communicate his weaknesses. He is honest about his concerns and trepidations. There is no pretense. When it looks like no Fellowship will ever be established, he walks up, picks up the One Ring and commits to taking it to be destroyed in the fires of Mt. Doom in Mordor. "I will take it," he declares in his most courageous hobbit voice. And then more meekly states, "But I do not know the way."

Pretense, guile, deception, arrogance, pride, and masks are all walls. They are all dividers. They all limit relationship. They all deny depth. Perhaps this is why Jesus' straightforward teaching was so astonishing, why he was declared to be one who taught with authority. There was no pretense. He was who he was. It's what separated Him from the Pharisees (whom He called "whitewashed tombs" - clean on the outside, dead on the inside) or indicted those arresting Him for coming at night under cover of darkness instead of during the day as Jesus taught at the temple.

You see this replicated in His apostles - Paul constantly admits that he is weak (e.g., 1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 11:28-31). But He also boasts about Jesus' strength. He does not glorify weakness, but glorifies Christ's strength in the midst of it. This is the potential of abandoning all masks - Jesus gets to show forth His great strength.

Final Thoughts

Paul seemed to rejoice in the life and witness of the Thessalonians - the first "Fellowship of Thessalonica". So in the first two chapters of 1 Thessalonians he seems to almost diagram what has happened to them, in them, and through them, as if describing it would bring clarity, encouragement, thankfulness, resolve and deep conviction. He writes (1 Thess 2:8,12):

"...so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

I'm not sure that any Life Group, Resource Group, Chi Alpha, church or anyone fully exhibits "The Family Code". But I long to. I long that my family, my Resource Group, and our Chi Alpha would. I think it breaks down Jesus' prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." May His kingdom come. May we live worthy of our King.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Of the 6 convictions of the Family Code which excites you the most and why?
2. Which do you long to grow in the most? Which of them do you find to be most challenging

3. Do you think Christian students believe there is something at stake on our campus? Why or why not?

4. How well does your Life Group or Resource Group live up to the Code? How could you begin to model a change?

5. If you had a seventh sentence to add to the Family Code what would it be?