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The Two-Parent Privilege with Melissa Kearney

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this episode, Kevin talks with Melissa Kearney, professor of economics at the University of Maryland, about her new book, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind* (University of Chicago Press, 2023). What is so great about being raised by two parents? When did marriage become a significant cause (and effect) of class distinctions? What can be done to restore the importance of marriage? How can we normalize the two-parent home without stigmatizing single mothers? Listen in as Kevin and Melissa tackle these questions, and many others, in this fascinating discussion about the economics of marriage.

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Books & Everything:

The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind

Ministry in the New Realm: A Theology of 2 Corinthians

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Transcript

Greetings and salutations. Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin D. Young, Senior Pastor at Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina.

And I am joined today by my special guest, Melissa Kearney. And we're going to talk about her new book called *The Two-Parent Privilege*. Melissa has a very august resume here.

She's professor of economics at the University of Maryland, director of the University of Maryland. She has a number of different research groups and a non-residency fellow at Brookings, and a scholar in a number of different labs and affiliations and journals and lots of good academic work that she's done. She did her undergraduate at Princeton, PhD in economics at MIT.

Melissa, thank you for coming on here to talk about your new book. Happy to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

So this is a book about parents, and it's a book where you're going to be able to use your expertise as a trained academic economist. But you also write personally, you say at the beginning and at the end in particular that you're a mom and an economist, and in that that's the correct order. That's what's most important.

And you have three kids. So tell us about your family. Okay.

It's exactly right. I'm a trained economist, but I think the greatest thing I do is be a mom to my three kids. A boy and two girls, and I'm raising them with my husband in suburban Maryland.

And how did you get to the University of Maryland, and are you a big Terps sports fan? I admit that I spend most of my time over in the economics department, but I do cheer for the Terps every now and then, and I'm delighted when they do well. I have been at the University of Maryland for 17 years now, moved down to DC from the Boston area probably 19 years ago, went to Brookings and a two-year fellowship, did some dedicated research there on topics that I've been working on for over two decades, U.S. inequality, poverty, child and family well-being, and then took a tenure track job at Maryland where I've been ever since. And I enjoy teaching the undergrads there and training PhD students there and working as part of a really intellectual, vibrant economics department.

And how did you get interested in this topic, which I know is part of broader interest. You

just mentioned inequality and other things, but this area having to do with families and parents. Since I was an undergrad, I've really been interested in economic and social lives of women and children.

I really have sort of always had an interest in questions about how society works or doesn't work well for certain groups of people with a particular interest in less economically advantaged groups. And so those are the questions that brought me to economics actually. Let me just say because a lot of people I think think about economics as finance or stock picking and that kind of thing, which is nothing to do with the kind of economics I do.

As an undergrad, I was interested in questions of society and public policy, took a bunch of those classes, but loved the rigor and theory and empirical work of economics. And so I use those tools of economics to ask these questions. How did I become interested in questions about women and families? I suppose it has to do with, you know, like many of us being interested in the world around us the way we grew up.

And so it was, you know, I grew up in New Jersey in the 80s, very cognizant of the fact that I had educational opportunities, economic opportunities that my mom and my grandma and their sisters didn't have. And so were my grandma's sisters didn't have. And so those kinds of questions really were at the forefront of my mind.

And then I spent a summer in college. This was really a very salient experience for me. I spent a summer in college working at a welfare to work center in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

And, you know, got to know and work with women who were my age at the time, probably between 17 and 22, and they were all moms receiving welfare. And they had to go to this training program in order to keep their benefits. But that summer just, you know, really sort of cemented my interest in thinking about how policies and economic conditions affect the decisions and well-being of women and families.

And so that's been a common thread of my research throughout my time as an academic economist. So I'm not an expert in these things. I'm a pastor.

My PhD is in history, but I like reading these things. And so I was interested to read not only you citing Sarah McClanahan a number of times, but you had her at Princeton. So tell us about her influence and anyone who's read in this area of marriage and family knows that she's done lots of really important empirical research.

What role did she play in your intellectual formation or interest in this? Sarah McClanahan really was a pioneer in this field. She created or launched what was called the Fragile Family Survey that, you know, interviewed and collected data on married parents at the time of their child's birth and tracked them over time. And so it's really a

credit to Sarah McClanahan that we have as much information as we do on these particularly vulnerable families, unmarried parents, mostly low income.

And so she really trained a lot of students in this field. I'm actually not a sort of, I don't consider myself a direct training of Sarah. She was a sociologist, but I did have the great fortune of taking her sociology of poverty class when I was an undergrad, even though I was an economics major.

And it was in her class that I was really introduced to this topic of family structure as it relates to poverty and child wellbeing. I think that was really formative because economists sort of pose questions in different ways. And so my work as an economist over the past 20 plus years looking at inequality and poverty has tended to focus on issues other than family structure.

But I was like teed up to recognize the importance of that early on, having been exposed to Sarah McClanahan as a professor in her work from early on. And so actually that's sort of the, the confluence of those events, me being an economist, bringing an economist lens to the topic, but knowing Sarah McClanahan's work really well, I think has just kept me noticing. Every time there's a study on inequality, social mobility, kids outcomes, you just see how important family structure is in the data.

And so I think, you know, it was she knowing her work, having her teach me early on in my studies of these topics has just sort of heightened my awareness of the role of family structure in driving these kinds of economic outcomes. Give you the lens to see what maybe other people haven't seen or didn't want to see. We'll get to that in a moment.

But just let's jump into your book. So I'm talking to Melissa Carney, the two parent privilege, how Americans stopped getting married and started falling behind. Just came out this fall published by University of Chicago Press.

So big picture question, what is the two parent privilege? The two parent privilege, as I'm using the term, refers to the fact that having two parents in one's home confers a lot of advantages to children. This is very well established in the data and in empirical research. The reason I call it a privilege is because not only is this a very advantageous situation, but increasingly in this country, this has become an advantageous situation, enjoyed disproportionately by an early advantage class.

And so it's really now college educated parents who continue to raise their kids in two parent homes at very high rates. Meanwhile, over the past 40 years, the share of children being raised in two parent households among those who were born to parents without a four year college degree has decreased by a really sizable amount. And it's just been a steady downward trend.

And so now having a two parent family is yet another privilege of the already most

privileged economic class in American society. So this is how you put it. You have some great summaries at the end and at the beginning.

But here's one in the preface. You say, I've studied US poverty inequality family structure for most quarter of a century approaches issues as a hard headed, albeit soft hearted MIT trained economist based on the overwhelming evidence at hand, I can say with the utmost confidence that the decline in marriage and the corresponding rise in the share of children being raised in one parent homes has contributed to the economic insecurity of American families has widened the gap in opportunities and outcomes for children from different backgrounds. And today poses economic and social challenges that we cannot afford to ignore, but may not be able to reverse.

I found a quotation just again, Sarah McClanahan and Elizabeth. Sawhill say this is the 2015 journal future of children quote most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children and other family forms across a wide range of outcomes. I want to dive into the data that you give in just a moment.

But back up a little bit and talk about why is this so hard to talk about because it's very clear in reading your book that you're trying very hard to talk about. I want to stick with the data and not to make moral value judgments. I'm a pastor so I can't avoid, you know, when I'm speaking from the Bible making, you know, some some value judgments that I think the Bible teaches.

But that's that's obviously not what you're doing and you're studiously trying to avoid that. And yet you talk at the beginning about how these conversations at academic conferences, I'm an economist much more comfortable talking about earned income. Tax credit and other kind of policy.

And when you talk about, well, what about marriage? It's the proverbial lead balloon. What is your experience been in? Why is even talking about this so difficult? Probably especially for someone like you in in in academic atmosphere. That's right.

So I have had some plenty of people comment on my book. This isn't hard for me to talk about my, you know, I talk about it with my church friends all the time. Right.

In academic settings, it's difficult. And there's a there's a lot of reasons here. I'm going to say most of them are very, very well intentioned, which is that most of us don't want to sound like we're blaming single mothers for their difficult circumstances and the relative disadvantage that their children suffers.

And I mean, I certainly don't want to sound like I'm blaming mothers, but also very much. Very sincerely, I mean this. I'm not blaming the single mothers.

I'm recognizing that this is a challenging situation. Any of us who are parents would, I

think, readily recognize that parenting is difficult. Doing it by oneself isn't, you know, that much more difficult.

So there's a genuine empathy there, but I think people get nervous about calling attention to the relative disadvantage that kids from single mother homes face because it sounds like we're blaming people who are in a very tough spot. Right. And I, right.

And I think we should be very capable of recognizing that single parents, the majority of whom are still single moms, single parents are in a very difficult spot. And that puts their kids in a difficult spot. And so we should be able to recognize that and have an honest conversation about it.

The other reason I think as academics, as economists interested in policy, it becomes difficult for us to talk about is because we don't have a very good answer to the critical question of, well, what do we do about it? Right. So if we talk instead about the fact that our tax code is not progressive enough or we're not raising enough revenue to cover expenses of things we feel like we might need to pay for, like more early childhood education or more public subsidies of childcare, it's pretty easy for us to sit in a room and come up with ways to make the tax code more progressive or design transfer programs to reach more people. It becomes a lot harder for us.

And it takes us out of our real comfort zone when it comes to things like how do we affect very personal decisions people are making about how to form their families and raise their children? Right. Yeah. It's very personal.

And it's almost impossible for any of us to talk about this or hear it without thinking of how I grew up, how I'm raising my kids. I think that's why it's so difficult. There was a survey I found these a couple years ago.

It's an online survey, whatever they're worth. I don't know the scientific methodology here, but it said more than 70% of participants believed that a single parent can do just as good a job as two parents, 60% of women, quote, agreed that children do best with multiple adults invested, but two married parents are not necessary. Christina Cross a few years ago in the New York Times had an article, The Myth of the Two Parent Home.

And even as I say those, I feel myself wanting to say, yeah, we're not just all the things you just said, Melissa, we're not saying that the single mom is to blame for all these problems. Where's the dad? The dad is for any number of reasons. And we're going to get to talking about boys and dads in just a bit.

But I think that just underscores those surveys for whatever they're worth. I imagine people getting that phone call or online being asked that question and thinking, well, I don't want to say that married couples are better than anyone else. Of course, any number of people.

And one of the myths, and I'd love for you to expound on this here, one of the myths you talk about several times in the book. Is that people have the idea, well, sure, people aren't married and kids aren't being raised as much in married families, but it's just kind of European style, laissez-faire relationships. And it's the same thing.

It's just people haven't gone through the formal structures of getting married. Is that true? Let me answer that and then come back to address the earlier points that you made specifically about some of the reactions. So that is completely not true, which is really important because, again, since I'm taking an economist lens to this issue, what really matters in the way I describe frame model and then empirically study marriage is the resources coming into a household.

So if you had two parents who were together the whole time committed to sharing their resources, which is their income, their time, their energy to raising kids together throughout a kid's childhood. In my version, economic version of this story shouldn't matter, but is a very practical level. That's not what unmarried parents are doing.

40% of kids in this country are now born to unmarried parents. 52% of kids born to moms without a four-year college degree are born to unmarried parents. 70% of children born to black moms in this country, unmarried parents.

These parents aren't married at the time of the child's birth. And as a practical matter, very few of them will be together, cohabiting, raising their kids together by the time his child is five years old, let alone 14 years old. This is one of the things we see in the data that Sarah McClanahan collected with her colleagues.

And so at a practical level, marriage, and then there's a whole bunch of theories as to why this is true, but marriage just provides an institutional framework. That keeps parents together in this arrangement, raising their kids together. And so we can't be blasé about these really high number of kids being raised in unmarried parents home, being born to unmarried parents, because again, what does that mean practically? It means that most of them will grow up in a one-parent home.

Okay, let me talk specifically just to respond to the reactions or critics that you raised. You know, 70% of adults say it's fine for kids to be raised in a single mother home. Well, that could mean very many things.

First, of course, there are lots of children who are raised by single moms who do phenomenally well. And there are plenty of single moms who have enough income or a village around them such that they can raise their kids in ways that are enriching home environments, and the kids can do very well. I'm focused on averages and large trends.

And so we can all recognize the heroic efforts that some single moms go to to make sure their kids are just as successful as anyone else's children. But that doesn't mean that on

average, two parents in a home don't have an easier time than one parent. And again, what we see in the data very clearly is that in a typical situation, two parent homes deliver more benefits to kids, and kids are more likely to stay at a poverty graduate high school, graduate college, achieve these markers of, you know, just sort of basic markers of success, setting aside personal, you know, qualities that we want in our children.

The Christina Cross, New York Times, you know, piece that said the myth of the two parent family, which she was arguing really is that, and she and I come to different conclusions, which she was arguing is that if you look at black families, the benefit of marriage wouldn't be as great as for white families. And so she's like, marriage doesn't solve our problems. And here's how I think about this.

And I've done extensive research on this and I've written an academic paper and I described this in the book. The way we should think about the benefits of marriage to a child depends on what the second parent would bring into the home. So if the second parent is not stably employed or has low income or isn't committed to the child, or in extreme situations would be a harmful presence or an abusive presence, then there wouldn't be a benefit of marriage.

But this doesn't mean that the decline in the two parent home isn't a crisis for children and families in this country. It means that it's not as easy as just saying more people that should get married. It means we have to actually grapple with what is it that's keeping millions of parents or millions of adults who have kids together from getting married.

What is it that's keeping millions of dads from being committed to their families? It just, it makes us look at root causes of the problem. It doesn't mean there's not a problem or that two parent homes aren't beneficial. Right.

And I remember looking at crosses argument and you look at, yes, there are differences between black families and white families. And yet the data show that it just again averages. It is better in America to be, I mean, just if you were to predict adult outcomes to be a black child raised by two parents than to be a white child raised in a one parent home.

So yes, there's still differences, but and marriage, of course, doesn't solve all problems. I don't know who would argue that marriage is going to solve all those problems. But on the whole, all other things, it's in, it's an advantage.

Melissa, where, you read about this in the book and you go through different options and theories and, you know, like a good economist, you have to say, well, it could be this and it could be that. We can't, we can't finally determine. But where do you think, in particular, this, this class divide goes? So, you know, 10 years ago in Charles Murray's book, Coming Apart, where he has, you know, fictional Fishtown and Belmont and sort of,

you know, in Belmont, the upper middle class are living one way and in Fishtown, another way.

And one of the ironies he says is the people in this, this Belmont are giving their stated views of one thing. Like, it doesn't matter and yet the way they're living shows a different kind of value system that graduate school get married, then have your children, which, you know, lots of studies show you do those things in that order. And the chances of you being in poverty in this country are very small.

So, how, where did these very stark divisions, because it wasn't like this you show. I mean, it wasn't like this in 1960 that there was such a division between, you know, the haves and the have nots getting even wider apart on their very marital formation. How did we get here? Yeah, so this is really this class gap in family structure and the share of kids being raised in two parent homes has emerged over the past 40 years.

And frankly, this is why anybody who professes to be concerned about income inequality or the erosion of social mobility needs to contend with this, because two parent homes are very protective of children, and they really increase, you know, kids likelihood of hitting all of these markers of success. And so what happened? Well, here's the broad stroke of the story I tell, based on my reading of all the data and relevant evidence, which is we had a social cultural revolution in the 60s and 70s changed our expectations for marriage, social norms around gender roles, the it eroded a bit the social convention of needing to be married to have kids together. Okay, and what we saw in the 60s and 70s was a reduction in marriage sort of across the board, even proportion across adults of different education levels.

In the 80s and 90s, things diverged quite starkly such that the decline in marriage stalled, stopped declining among adults, went men and women with a four year college degree. So their rates of marriage have barely declined in 40 years, and we see that the share of kids being raised in a married parent home, if they're born to a mom with a four year college degree, that's decreased over this 40 year period, by only 6 percentage points from 90% to 84%. It's a very small decrease when you realize how much bigger and more diverse that group is.

So now about 30% of moms have a four year college degree as compared to only about 11% and yet still raising your kids in a married parent home is holding steady among that class. But in the 80s and 90s, we saw that the share of kids being raised in a married parent home, not just for the most educationally disadvantaged adults with out a high school degree, but really interestingly, and I think under appreciated in the middle. So moms with a high school degree or some college, we might have considered them sort of the middle class, right? The likelihood that their kids are being raised in a married parent home fell from 83% to 60%.

That is a massive drop in 40 years. So now where are we in 2020? You know, we've got

this really large, very obvious class divergence. I think part of this is driven by the economic challenges facing non college educated men in particular over the 80s, 90s and early 2000s.

We have a lot of research from economics showing that secular global changes think increased import competition from abroad, think the adoption of technologies and industrial robots that pushed sort of both of those trends pushed non college educated men out of well paying middle class jobs, either out of the workforce or into lower paying jobs, think the erosion of unions and other sort of wage supporting institutions. Basically, all of these trends were unkind to non college educated workers, which in an economic sense made them less attractive or necessary as marriage partners to the extent that one of the things husbands do is bring financial resources to a home. And so that's I think part of the story, but then you've got this, you know, cyclical effect where the economics make the institution of marriage less attractive or necessary because women outside the college educated class are doing better compared to men, right? So they're more likely to be able to do it on their own and he's less likely to be stable provider.

So you've got this confluence events and that changes the social norm because now more and more people in your community are having and raising their kids out of the way. So you've got economics and social changes amplifying each other. And that's why this is a cycle that really needs to be broken.

So I want to come back to those numbers in just a second. I need to just mention our first sponsor, Crossway Books. Thank you for sponsoring life and books and everything.

And today I want to mention their new Testament theology series. Here's one of the volumes to do. On Second Corinthians by Dean Orton.

So thank you to Crossway for sponsoring LBE and check out their good books in that new series. Melissa, I want to just underscore you have this nice chart, these numbers you just gave here on the book. So just to say, because this is really important.

You just said this. So four year college. This is in 1980.

So 90% of children living with married parents. High school or college in 1980, 83%. Less than high school, 80%.

So that's a really tight back in 1980. You know, from 80 to 90%. So whether you had high school, some high school college, you're roughly the same.

That in statistical terms is pretty close. And then, I mean, you just show how four year college declines a little bit, but these other from 83 to 60, from 80% to 57% is a major decline among those less educated. And you've talked about some of the reasons why they that may be and about the, the, the marriageable man thesis.

And so you hit on that there. I want to ask the question. So maybe it's twofold.

Are these the women, because almost all of these single parent households are headed by women? Is it the case that they're looking to get married and they just, I can't find the, the right guy, or is it the case that there's, the norms are such that marriage just isn't something that they think of? And then, you know, set follow up is, is there anything we can do about that? I'm reminded of a quip. I, I wrote an article last year for first things with it, which is a Catholic journal about declining fertility rates. And I looked at, you know, all of the things they've tried to do in Japan and other places, which have had almost no effect on increasing fertility.

And somebody had this line, you know, government programs can help you maybe encourage you to have the kids you want, but they won't convince you to have the kids you don't want. And it's maybe sort of the same with, with marriage. There are some policy things.

If you want to get married, they can help it. But if you're not looking for that, what can we do? This is a really important point, which is that there does not seem to be evidence that people in the US have whole scale rejected the institution of marriage. I know there are some groups that essentially say marriage is a patriarchal institution and it's not, it's not compatible with modern-day feminism.

And so, of course, you're going to have a reduction in marriage. And let me just say before I go further on this, that let's keep coming back to the fact that college educated women, the most economically successful women, perhaps in the history of the world, we're still getting married and raising our kids in married parent homes. So I reject the proposition that marriage is inherently at odds with any feminist view of women's economic participation or success.

So then it's the question of, okay, well, why has marriage fallen out of favor outside the college educated class? And when you look at the ethnographic evidence and the qualitative surveys of low-income couples, unmarried couples who avail themselves of some of the government programs or government-funded programs, their community offered programs that work with unmarried parents trying to strengthen families, what you see in those interviews and those qualitative studies is that a lot of these couples say they want to be together. And we saw this in the Fragile Family Survey too, right? They say they want to be together, they plan to be together. And then for a whole variety of reasons, they can't make that work.

This too should really affect our willingness to grapple with this as an equity issue. If you've got high-income couples, highly educated couples, who are managing to achieve and make this very advantageous structure work for them, shouldn't we want more people who say they want to be able to have a two-parent home and a happy, healthy marriage? Shouldn't we help them achieve it, even if they can't pay for high-priced

marriage counseling or whatever? What do you see? There are real barriers. There's economic instability that makes someone either less willing to commit to taking care of a family or makes, you know, the mother of his children less likely to accept him as a resident at UC substance abuse, you see mental health challenges, you see a lot of these adults grew up in homes that weren't characterized by stable, healthy marriages, growing up in communities where their friends and cousins and other role models are not raising their kids in this way.

So here's an opportunity for community groups and for public funding and philanthropic groups and for church groups to say, what can we do to help strengthen families, to meet them where they are and help make them stronger? At the same time, creating a social convention and expectation among children being raised and teenagers now, this is something to strive for. This will make your household more economically viable, it will confer benefits to your children. So it's both meeting families where they are now, but I think setting our sights on what do we want to accomplish going forward and how do we get there? That's great and really helpful.

You have a great chapter on boys and dads and I'm going to ask you a question not so much as an economist, but so you can see if you want to answer it or not. But as a teacher and as a professor and maybe the sort of students that are coming to University of Maryland are so self-selecting of such a high elite caliber that you wouldn't see this, but I just wonder in your years of teaching, there's lots of social science research on the ways that boys are falling behind and we can even say anecdotally, young men are drawn to online influencers, some of whom are sort of helpful, some of whom are really unhelpful. I just wonder, have you sensed something, I mean you work with young people of different ages, have you sensed in the last generation that there are more challenges or more anxiety, despondency, what do you sort of on the ground sense and in particular about boys and men? The, I think the single biggest thing that gets me down as a professor and I've, you know, I've been working with the young adults now for almost 20 years, there really is, you just see it, just a widespread anxiety among them, men and women alike, that I just, I don't, I don't think I know, I certainly didn't notice it 20 years ago, now I'm very aware of the fact that I've been a parent and so now I see these 20-year-olds, it's like closer and closer to my own children, but the amount of kids, I mean kids, right, they're young adults, like 18 to 22, who come to my office, often, like, you know, young men too, I'll call them in and I'll say, what happened, what happened on the test, right, like, what happened, you come to class, like what, and they're big guys and they have their hoodie up and they look like they don't care.

And then they'll, then they'll start crying and they'll be like, you know, I'm not, I'm not making this up, right, and all of these anecdotes are part of the reason why I felt so like I had to read this book, even though I don't tell these anecdotes in the book. They'll be like you know my parents just announced they're getting divorced I think they thought it was okay because we're at college now, but I'm I'm having a tough semester or You

know my grandma raised me and it was just me and my grandma and my grandma died and I'm having a tough semester or I Can't figure out what I'm gonna do with the rest of my life And I'm really stressed and I'm supposed to be interviewing for jobs And I just don't know and just the the amount of sadness and anxiety among young people who who have their whole lives ahead of them Right who I think just should be filled with energy and I don't want to over I don't want to over tell this story because There is something that's also really energizing of being among young people But I just I worry about them. I do I worry about them and I wish as adults we could do more To make them feel Comfortable and confident and safe and secure and like it's okay.

Yeah, do you think boys in particular are Wondering well, I suppose men and women, but you know, you talk about the the incredible importance of yeah of dads and You know that that wonderful story about the the dads was it in Louisiana who showed up at school and you know gang participation Plumited and even some of the the metrics you give with It even seems that boys in the home are more affected by the by the lack of a father than girls are Yeah, this is I mean again this comes out of really rigorous Econometric studies we see that the gender gap favoring girls meaning girls are now less likely to get in trouble at school They've always been but that gap is widened. They're more likely to graduate high school They're more likely to go to college again girls are more likely to hit all these markers of success This has been happening over the same decade that we've had a tremendous rise in the share of kids growing up without dads in their home and Researchers economists have worked very hard to establish a causal link here showing that that gender gap That favors girls is wider among kids coming from mother-only homes than two parent homes and then Economists have gone further and looked at the mechanisms and shown that the absence of additional parental inputs meaning time Nurturing parenting that kids from single parent homes get again not because single moms aren't Great parents. It's because they don't have a second parent in the house to help right? I don't know my wife is always I don't know how I would do this right? I certainly don't know how I would do it So this isn't into to impugn single moms again It's to say that there are more parenting resources in two parent homes and we see that lower level of parenting inputs and nurturing parenthood has a large larger effect on the Behaviors and outcomes of boys.

I want to be careful because they don't think we should erroneously conclude from that that girls aren't necessarily struggling, but girls might be struggling in different ways Whereas boys again We know on average are more likely to express their struggles by acting out in ways that are going to get them suspended in trouble with the law All sorts of things that could really impede Their educational and Aggressive noticeable public again on average, right? Uh-huh, and so that's bad for them. This too is why this is so important to intervene Like from all angles and break this because let's get back to why we think there's a reduction in marriage outside the Outside the college educated class men are either viewing themselves as Less likely to be stable good providers for family

women are less likely to view them that way Then you have millions of boys being raised without dads in their house That actually makes them less likely to be in a position to be You know, stably employed emotionally stable support of husbands and fathers and and and this gets back to something else You brought up with well the elite class is raising their kids in this way And frankly, it's I mean not only does it reject the Overwhelming evidence and data showing that kids benefit from having dads in their homes But it's extraordinarily elitist and obnoxious quite frankly to say no my kid benefits from having me in the home because I'm a great guy and I can read to them and really equip them But do we really expect the you know, 40% of kids who are born to less educated dads to benefit from their fathers? Like let's give up on those guys and just assume a government program It's gonna make up for them and I just I Refused to resign ourselves to that view of society. Yeah.

Oh, I hadn't thought of it that way but that there there is a level of Self-aggrandizement of course, I'm valuable I wouldn't want my kids to be without because I'm a very special parent. Well, we're all probably We're all probably capable of being better parents than we think and we're probably less special than we think at the same and Kevin this is analogous to the conversation about college and We know that people with a college degree do better in the labor market and and there's a push to try and get more people Through college, right? We have lots of policy interventions to aimed at doing that But there's a group of people that says well, not everybody needs college and and the critics of that view always say but ask them if they're sending their kid to college Right, right. Yeah, similar thing like well, you don't need two parents and Your kid doesn't go to college.

But by the way, I'm gonna shower two parents worth of resources on my kid and make sure they go to a four-year college Yeah, I wonder I would love to I mean if if you're willing how does this How does this affect how you are as a mom if your kids are anything like my kids? They are not gonna read your book. Maybe your kids are really high overachievers But I've written some stuff and I I try to gift it to know I'm not interested in it But this is is informing and is shaped by and probably downstream in some ways from your own parenting What sort of message is given the expertise you have in this area? Are you trying to give to your own kids? To be overt I am very aware of the fact that my kids are growing up Not only in a two-parent house of themselves, but surrounded by people who are being raised in two-parent households Which is huge because that's what it looks like in You know sort of well-off community, which is where we live. I mean, I'm I'm very I'm very open about the fact that I recognize my kids are being raised in a very privileged setting and and so it's You know a kids absorb what they see around them and and again We know this from evidence even though it also is incredibly intuitive that kids worldview is shaped by what they experience and so Yeah, I mean I probably should talk about it more explicitly.

Let's say with my kids But I don't really worry that my daughters are thinking that maybe

they would become young unmarried mothers. That's I mean I'm not Foolish to think that things don't happen right? But That's that's not really something they observe very often in in the people around them that they're being raised with right and so They just sort of by default expect That they're gonna go to college and also I you know interesting for me as a mom They see me and my sisters all Working and having careers and I assume that that affects the way they think of it now My daughters also think I work too much and they don't want to work as much which is also fair right like they're definitely but That was something actually I grew up in a different generation than my mom where I assumed I was going to work and have a career But then thinking of my own mom But I also assumed I was gonna have kids and be a really involved mom and there was some conflict there but I so I think about that a lot like my You know how our kids see us and our community is effect with The aspirations there. Yeah, absolutely, you know have for themselves So and maybe that's a good transition to sort of a last line of questioning.

I do want to let's see I mentioned one other sponsor desiring God new book foundations for lifelong learning education in serious joy by John Piper available next week When this is recorded so check that out always great to see what John is writing there about education in serious joy Thank you to desiring God That's a great transition because you use the the phrase a number of times in the book and you're just that's really this really what you're talking about social norms because there there are lots of things as an economist and think about different policies and Those things do matter. They're not irrelevant. They can nudge people.

They can make certain decisions more or less Likely or palatable, but then you have this big bucket of well social norms One of the the things I underlined throughout the book that you would often mention as a kind of a side you'd say well Asian families are the exception to this and I couldn't help say well. There are some very strong social norms that You know, that's that's not just a stereotype I mean, there's there's data to support that very strong social norms about marriage about education about all these things. So Is there is there a possibility to affect social norms? How do we go about it because it seems like that the biggest thing we can do lots of things around the edges to try to help push people in the right direction for the well-being of Society and their families and kids and yet social norms are very There's no program to change a community social norms.

This is why this is a hard issue for Like economists and policy wonks because like you said we could do all sorts of tinkering around the edges I can propose and I have proposed changes to the tax code that would be less punishing frankly of marriage There are definitely tinkering if you think that more tax breaks for having kids. I have nine kids So I would welcome as many as you can get All foreign expanded child tax credit. I'm all for a child allowance I'm certainly for what I've referred to as a secondary or tax deduction so that we don't penalize Married couples or two workers when they get married We have all sorts of ways we could tinker around the edges And I think those will you know like you said nudge some people and have incremental effects But really

turning this around is going to require a change in social conventions And now you're moving further and further away from the economist policy toolkit But again, you know some critics are like oh she tells us this big problem and then there's no real solutions But in some sense what I'm trying one of the things I'm trying to accomplish with this book is here I know there's a problem now all of you who do things more than just tinker with the tax code Let's address.

Yeah, this is her this is her pastors and communities and other yeah, there are things we could do now That's on the one hand on the other hand because I am an economist. That's how we do things on the one hand on the other hand Social norms are surprisingly malleable and they can also change very quickly and We have again good social science evidence showing that things like role models matters We were just discussing things like media messaging matters. Let me give you a couple examples Eliana La Ferreira and her colleagues have shown that in Brazil when soap operas came on TV.

This is sort of amazing using variation in Where they were viewed at different timing they document a causal link exposure to the smaller families and divorce on The you know, like in those communities that saw those media images That led to a change in family formation an increase in divorce fewer kids like people responded by emulating what they saw on tv In a very different setting my colleague phil oven and I looked at what happened when the 16 and pregnant and teen mom franchise Really interesting point of the book. This is crazy all of a sudden one year teen childbearing in the us went down by way more than it had been falling so teen childbearing has been falling and had been falling in the us and then one year there was like a really large drop and We had studied this issue enough to know it wasn't the unemployment rate. It wasn't sex ed.

What could this be? It turns out that when this show came on tv which millions of teenagers watched It was a pretty realistic depiction of how unglamorous it was to be pregnant at 16 and have a new pregnant is the mtv 16 and pregnant and so we had an array watch all the shows and code up what happens well what happens Most of the boyfriends don't stick around most of these young girls are stuck with a crying baby in the middle of the night Like you might have thought that people would know being a teen mom was hard But apparently this was really salient and in those communities where more people were watching mtv before this show even came on So this mtv just had more market penetration in certain areas When this show came on the air you saw a larger reduction in teen childbearing in those places And so the idea here is, gosh, this show really changed hearts and minds in ways that affected behaviors That affected birth rates and so we got access to google and twitter data and you see that when these episodes aired There would be a spike in google searching for how to get birth control There would be a spike in tweets mentioning the show and birth control. So there was this idea that People saw this show and decided they didn't want to become pregnant as a teenager which again It's just really amazing because it validates this idea that Exposure to content and ideas affects people's attitudes in ways that affects their

behaviors Even in the really complicated domains of marriage family formation and having kids. It was a really fascinating I've heard of the show.

I can't say I've watched it before or that we have a lot of mtv on but Yeah, I mean you did the the homework to show there's probably some connection there You say at the the end of the book Here are things we should do to address the challenges i've laid out and then some things I do not think we should do And these are good but I wanted to highlight two because I just wonder How do we do both of these things? So here's what you say we should do work to restore and foster a norm Of two parent homes for children Good. Here's one thing we should not do Stigmatize single mothers or encourage unhealthy marriages. So I agree with both of those things Here's what I wrestle with a lot and I wrestle with it as as a pastor in its Stigma so we think of stigma as universally a bad thing And yet We want to stigmatize racism or all sorts of things there are bad behaviors That our culture and our communities do a lot to say That's what that's a bad thing to do So I think as as a pastor and you know, I don't know what what your views are on this I'm not presuming that you share these personal views But so like I believe the bible says that sex before marriage is is wrong but I but it also The bible says you can be forgiven for that and it's it's not the end of your life And so on the one hand I think about our church community Which has a pretty thick culture and what you described, you know, your neighborhood There are certain norms.

There are certain things that it just looks normal To have a mom and a dad It looks normal to work hard at school. It looks normal to not do drugs I mean there's also to pursue education all of these things are good And so there would be if somebody like in our church You know was 16 and pregnant it would it would raise eyebrows And there'd be something of a of a stigma. So on the one hand I want to say I also hope you guys would love her an embrace her Yes, absolutely.

So what i'm getting to is How do we do it so that the behavior So like in our case would be stigmatized, but the person is not Cast off and in fact somebody said this really just helped open my of course I should you know, it's not even out of wedlock births I mean we should from my perspective Applaud the mom who is is going through and having the child and and working to You know sacrifice so much through we want to applaud that decision. I do So it's always this push and pull of How to establish norms because norms say something is normal But then when when something is outside of that normal as you are right to interject Yeah, I I want our community to to love that mom and and sign up for meals Which I I know they would and buy diapers and do all of that How do you think about that as an economist or even just as a as a mom or as a As a person. Yeah, I mean, I think you completely put your finger on the probably the hardest Needle i'm trying to thread by saying those two things and somebody said directly to me like we do need to bring back shame But but there's there's you know, there's a There's a role for it.

So here's what I mean when I say that I'll give you examples of things on those two points that I wouldn't wouldn't do so The stigma of single moms and their kids that basically in the past made them outcast from society Let's all agree. We should never go back to that Right. We do not want women feeling like they're trapped in Abusive marriages right and we do not want Children and their single parents to be even more deprived of resources by punishing them for your 18 and you didn't You get second class life for the rest of it.

Yeah, so those are terribly counterproductive Approaches that we should never go back to at the same time I mean, I'm not going to totally point my finger at like Disney plus our netfics or Hollywood But you know the the television portrayal of families has gone so far to say It's totally fine You know, this one's being raised with her mom and her new boyfriend but her old boyfriend is still they're all good friends And oh and by the way, it's awesome, but that's such a First that's not really what it looks like. So let's be honest that You know, we could accept and love All sorts of family arrangements while still being honest about What is best for kids in particular? And by the way, it's not great for single parents who tend to be under-resourced to be doing this by themselves so the kinds of things about fostering norms for instance a lot of the social service agencies or programs for you know single moms and their kids The dads will tell you this you go into those buildings and the picture Like the logo is basically a mom and her daughter or her mom and her child. Yeah, there's not even a dad in the picture Right and so these were fatherhood programs walk in and they're like The dad isn't even in the picture in a in an effort to being Sort of welcoming of the reality that a lot of these Programs serve single moms and their kids There's not even an expectation of a dad being around and that kind of subtlety I think matters Right, so I was even talking to a woman who runs a program for Lifting up single moms and I said to her well, you're part of the solution you're working to strengthen families and she she stopped and very thoughtfully she said But I've never thought to ask where's the dad? Why isn't he around and that's a bit of a mind shift Right to say let's think about strengthening families Let's talk about the importance of dads how they can contribute Without Stigmatizing the one parent and their child so strongly that they feel like they're not enveloped in support Right.

Yeah, and there's and I think you know, you said earlier this is going to happen at a Personal level and community level. I mean I think of a number of women in our church who volunteer with a christian young lives program that that Reaches out and my my younger daughters have volunteered to do some of the babysitting so these single moms can get Training and you know in our context as bible studies and other things and it's it's there's lots of people who do care about these things And anybody listening who who does there there are things and good programs that can make a difference and help with these So let me let me my last question for you. Thank you so much for writing this book.

Melissa I if any of my kids go to the university of Maryland, it's not on their list But if they do i'll tell them to take a class if you're doing undergrads What what do you have coming

up next? What are you working on academic books popular books? What are you doing? Hopefully the You know some of the negative feedback you're probably getting on this book doesn't uh Doesn't keep you away from it because it's really helpful. I appreciate that I will say because of course I wrapped up this manuscript, uh, you know some time ago before it actually shows up in print. Yeah um Over the past two years i've been working a lot trying to understand the decline in fertility Which is another you know not uncontroversial topic.

Uh-huh, but again There's a lot of economic causes and consequences to the decline in fertility and so that's another one where Setting aside all sorts of moral or value judgments about how we think somebody should live their lives the fact that In high-income countries we are now below replacement level fertility is going to pose a lot of challenges on our economic and social Structures good. So i'm studying that as you know what i've been thinking about well I I will read that and i'm glad for you to to write that it's really important Again talking to melissa the two parent privilege how americans stopped getting married and started falling behind Thank you so much for taking time and working before we started this to get all the the mics and headsets So and thank you to your husband. It was a pleasure.

Thanks for having me. Yeah, thank you. So Uh, thank you for listening to life and books and everything Ministry of clearly reforms you can get episodes like this and other resources at clearly reform.org until next time Glorify god enjoy and forever read a good book