

# Spiritual Practices for Families

## SESSION 2

*Today's families come in many variations, but all tend to be very busy. Is family spirituality a contradiction? Not if we view spirituality not as an escape from our everyday lives but as a search for God in our busy schedules.*

### The Domestic Church

The fourth-century Christian scholar Jerome may have been the first to refer to the Christian family as the domestic church. Other thinkers have echoed his ideas through the years. We readily think of families coming together to create congregations, families gathering to become the church. We may not realize that the Christian family is itself a true and valid expression of the church. Your household is not merely part of the congregation that meets a few blocks away. In fact, your family is the church of Jesus Christ gathered at \_\_\_\_\_, and here you can fill in your own street address. This notion is what we mean by the domestic church.

The idea would have been obvious to the first Christians who met for worship in private homes and celebrated Communion at dinner tables. Yet we are talking about something more than a house church. In a house church, the worship ends and the visitors depart until the next gathering time, but even then the family in that home remains a domestic church—a group of believers living together in covenant fellowship and mutual commitment within the gracious calling of Jesus Christ. At chores, at play, at rest, at dinner, through all the varied expressions of household life, even at times of conflict, the Christian family remains a domestic church.

In the last session, we looked specifically at households with children and explored intergenerational approaches to spirituality and family worship. However, we cannot assume that children are always part of every family. Some families are childless by choice or circumstance. Indeed, children are at most a kind of parenthesis in married life. Couples usually begin a shared journey without children, and they continue that journey after the children have matured into adulthood. Even in blended families in which partners are parents from the onset, the parents know that their children will grow up and the foundation of family life will revert to a married couple. Therefore, in this session we will shift our focus to the spirituality of adult relationships.

## The Great Mystery

Marriage is the most fundamental relationship of the Christian family. The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians recognizes the profound significance of the bond between two people when the writer compares marital relations to the ties between Christ and the church. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (5:31–32).

Even if the full meaning of this “great mystery” eludes us, we may draw a few ideas from this fascinating passage. First, if marriage is analogous to the relationship between Christ and his church, family life is primarily a spiritual reality. Home life is not days of maintenance and secular activities occasionally punctuated with prayer or worship. The family is a spiritual entity whose life is lived entirely in the presence of God.

Second, within family life is an abiding mystery. In the New Testament, the term mystery suggests God’s purposes at work in human life in ways we can neither fully discern nor completely understand. In the mundane round of family life, God’s loving will unfolds in continually surprising ways. In the midst of the most tedious and insignificant matters, God may sneak up on us with moments of dazzling grace. If we accept family existence as a mystery, we must acknowledge that every moment is pregnant with divine possibilities.

Third, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life intersect in the home. Part of the mystery alluded to in the Letter to the Ephesians is the reciprocity between how we relate to one another and how we relate to God. The more faithfully and selflessly we love the members of our own household, the more fully we are able to love God. And in turn, the deeper our relationship with our Creator, the more profoundly we can love one another. In family life we discover that the respective commandments to love our neighbor and to love God are inextricably tied together. We cannot possibly excel in one while neglecting the other

### **Being the Church at Home**

It’s well and good to say that the Christian home is the domestic church, but what are the implications of such a claim? Where does this theology lead us?

One frequently cited definition of the church is found in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This overview of the church’s shared life is not abstract but eminently practical, a list of the community’s activities. We might interpret the list like this:

- Telling the story
- Caring for one another
- Worshiping
- Praying

How we translate these basic responsibilities into contemporary practice offers endless possibilities— one reason there are so many differing denominations in the world today. Your family will bring its own personality, its own needs, and its own strengths to these four areas of spiritual life. No one can prescribe an inflexible standard of spirituality that will apply to every household. Nevertheless, we will offer an example for each facet of domestic church life as yeast for your own thinking.

## **Telling the Story**

The most obvious application of telling the story is ongoing Bible study. Certainly Christian families of any composition will take seriously the call to feed ourselves on God’s word written in the Bible. However, while the Bible is indispensable to us, God’s unfolding story is not limited to the pages of Scripture. God is at work every day in the life of each Christian, indeed each person, but Christians especially seek to discern God’s activity in our days. We can look for God’s fingerprints alone, but the insight of a fellow faith-traveler is helpful to open our eyes to moments we might overlook on our own.

Some marriage counselors encourage couples to set aside a few minutes each day to review the events of the day and to share feelings about how things have gone. For most couples, ten or fifteen minutes are enough to accomplish this.

The challenge is to safeguard that time every day without fail and to ignore all distractions— even ringing telephones and vibrating pagers. This simple daily exercise deepens marital intimacy by keeping each partner in touch with the other and encouraging the communication of feelings.

The benefits are surprising when each spouse makes a wholehearted effort to answer these questions: What happened to me today? How do I feel about those events? Christian couples can add one more question: Where was God in my day? The question requires us to recall moments when we felt grace or love, when others were kind to us,

when we had the opportunity to show love to others. With practice we grow more attentive to daily “God moments,” and sharing that account with a trusted friend both deepens intimacy and allows a loving partner to cheer us on the way.

Caring for One Other Beyond the obvious ways of nurturing one another physically and emotionally, Christian partners have a responsibility to help each other mature in discipleship. We have alluded to this above, but let us be explicit. As Ross Snyder writes, “A marriage is not just a personal relationship of affection between two people; it is a joint venture into a life of growth.”<sup>1</sup>

It is never a spouse’s job to reform or “fix” a partner, but we are obligated to hold each other accountable to become the best and fullest expressions of the people God meant us to be. God gives us to each other as helpmates. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help” (Eccl. 4:9–10).

Affirmation is a good way to call out the best in a spouse. When we show our appreciation for a brave decision, a selfless act, or a beloved character trait, we lift up what is best and invite continued growth in that area. Sincerely compliment your partner every day. The results will be better persons in a sweeter marriage.

## **Worshiping**

The word ritual carries a negative meaning for many people, suggesting something empty and phony. However, at its best the use of ritual gives a comforting and reliable shape to life, enabling us to express our feelings when words fail us. All families create rituals, usually by accident, but Christians can be unapologetically intentional about such matters. We know that the dividing line between the spiritual and the physical is arbitrary, abolished by God’s incarnation in human flesh.

Consider the use of favorite foods, candles, memorized Scriptures, beloved songs, keepsakes, and special places as you invite God to join you in seasonal holidays, family celebrations, baptismal observances, anniversaries, and times of grieving. In my family, the red dinner plate symbolizes accomplishment, encouragement, love— and freedom from helping with after-dinner cleanup.

## **Praying**

Some adults have never progressed in prayer beyond the basic models of “Lord, gimme what I want,” and “God bless mommy and daddy and Aunt Beulah. . . .” There’s nothing wrong with either of those styles of prayer. I trust that every Christian will regularly ask God to bless loved ones and to provide for personal needs. Even so, the “gimme” prayer and the “God bless” prayer offer room for growth. Well-meaning Christians have sometimes confessed to me, “I’d pray more, but I really don’t know how to do it. After about thirty seconds, I can’t think of anything else to say.”

Lectio divina is one way of expanding our prayer options. The phrase means “divine reading.” Lectio leads us into the Bible as a valuable resource for our conversations with God and reminds us that listening is at least as important as speaking when we approach our Lord. Perhaps the best aspect of lectio is that this form of prayer lends itself equally well to private or community prayer. Here is a simple approach to lectio.

- Read a brief passage of Scripture aloud. You may wish to follow a lectionary for daily readings, use a psalm each day, or read through a book of the Bible using one passage or story each day. Usually six or eight verses are plenty to chew on.
- Rest in silence. Open yourself to God’s presence. Expect to hear from God.
- Read the passage aloud a second time.
- Listen for a word or phrase that seizes your attention. Open yourself to the passage and wait for what God will give you. Do not work at it. In a family setting, make room for each person to share (without comment or elaboration) the word or phrase that has caught his or her heart. Encourage all to speak.
- Read the passage aloud a final time.
- Respond to the reading. Discern what God is giving you by way of guidance, comfort, or calling. Having listened to God, can you tell what difference this will make in your life? What will you do about it? Again, make time for everyone to share what he or she has received.

### **This Is the Day!**

Your Christian family is a domestic church. This is God’s gift to you, a present reality. However you are praying, worshiping, nurturing, and living the story, you are already the church. Celebrate God’s presence in your house. Love your partners in faith. Give thanks for the healthy spiritual practices already established in your home.

And if you want to try something new, start today. It’s never too late to grow.

**About the Writer** H. Michael Brewer is a full-time pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a part-time writer, and an adjunct professor of religious studies at Northern Kentucky University. He enjoys gardening, hiking, and kayaking.