Home, Sweet Home

Practical Aspects of Ministry to the Devotional Family

with Bible-study discussion starters for church leaders involved in ministry to Christian families

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[Special thanks to Prof. John F. Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for his seminal work, "Sweeter than Honey . . . ," in which he has described six foundation goals for meditating on God's Word. These goals serve as the foundation for the six essays that follow. A brief Bible study has been added to each essay to encourage discussion among church leaders involved in ministry to Christian families.]

Usually twice a year (but never more), I slip away to a little Greek bakery in my neighborhood. My doctor has me on a rigid, low-fat, sugar-free diet, but I rationalize my choice. There it is! *Baklava*—a delicate Mediterranean pastry, baked in olive oil, with crushed nuts crammed between flaky-thin layers, and saturated with pure honey.

I ask for two. Three would be excessive. But you don't *eat* baklava, you celebrate it; that requires more than one serving.

I take the oil-stained paper bag to the car where for the next ten minutes I lose myself in a sensory experience bordering on the transcendental—oil dripping from my chin, flakes of sticky pastry dotting my lap. I am addicted. Life would not have the same passion, the same rhythms or symmetry without these infrequent trips to Nick Papas Bakery.

You have the right man. I have cravings.

Bear with me for another confession. Words such as *devote*, *devout*, and *devotional* express biblical concepts. 1 Chronicles 22:19, for example, where David instructs the leaders of Israel to help Solomon build the temple, helps define our subject: "Now *devote* your heart and soul to seeking the LORD your God. . . ." *Devoting time to seeking God—thinking about God, talking about God, studying his Word.* That's a good working definition. The devotional family (Christian home) spends time and energy seeking God.

Now for my confession. I am honored by your invitation, but I am not enthusiastic about the assignment. You have asked me to probe a painful subject, a source of personal embarrassment, and (I dare say) a synodical disgrace.

Any honest discussion of this topic must address sin—particularly sins of neglect and omission. And often we will not be speaking of the sins of *other* families or *other* parents, we will be speaking about sins of neglect and omission in our own homes. Some of us need to be called to repentance—double jeopardy for those of us serving in public ministry! Such a message will not win me new friends. Furthermore, I am not qualified to deliver the message because I am not above reproach. Nevertheless, this needs to be said:

We will, *in all humility,* need to consider the devotional life in our own home before we can hope to help other families.

If your plea is that yours is the "hurried-home," you need to be reminded that you have been given the same twenty-four hours in each day as everyone else. You have choices to make and will make them on the basis of what seems urgent or important to you. Go home; think and pray about what's important to you and your family.

If your family neglects devotional activity because it lacks spiritual leadership, you are ignoring a responsibility mandated by God. Repent. And return to fulfilling God's expectations for you as a Christian parent.

If your family finds it impossible to talk about sensitive matters in Scripture's light because the issues are too painful or complex, seek counsel for overcoming denial and work at improving your communication skills.

That is the essential message; time, leadership, and communication are the issues. The problem is immediate, of monumental proportions, and perilously serious. But because these are deeply personal issues, this is the kind of discussion that could be talked into oblivion. We cannot afford to let that happen. Ultimately, we will have to get down to doing something about it.

Of one thing I am absolutely certain: if each of us is

to go home a different person from the one who came here, we will, *in all humility*, need to consider the devotional life in our own home before we can hope to help other families find their spiritual roots.

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We study God's Word to learn the truths that direct us to salvation and to be strengthened in our faith in these truths.

There once lived a fine Christian man who loved his wife and children deeply. In the spring of their lives together, the man worked very hard to provide for his family. And he made every effort to be a loyal companion to his wife and a good father to his children.

In time the man had saved enough money to build a fine new house—a haven, safe from wild animals and thieves.

Many other people settled in the same valley, so the choices for friends, schools, shopping, and jobs quickly multiplied. The man's children gleaned new ideas from the many cultures they rubbed elbows with daily! They seemed to thrive upon the freedom to shape themselves without restraint or boundaries. The man thought to himself, "This is good; each of my children can now truly become his own person and create his own destiny."

As the leaves turned from green to orange, the man noticed a draft wafting through the hallways of his house. "This will never do," he thought. "Winter will soon be upon us. If I do not insulate against the cold, we will freeze." So the Christian man weather-stripped all the doors and windows and put a thick layer of insulation in the attic.

Soon the gales of November whistled in from the north, but the house was still not airtight. The cold crept in beneath the floorboards and through the tiniest of cracks by the windowsills. But no one complained. The family's collective hearts were being warmed by a new kind of sharing. They had become connected with all the people on the globe (or so it seemed) by a magic chip. And each child grew closer to becoming his own person. So they did not notice the coldness all around.

His family seemed happy, but the man was troubled; and he felt alone. He saw that his children talked less with each other. He wondered what good a family was if its members stopped laughing together and working together.

The neighbors didn't seem very neighborly anymore either. People moved in and out so fast that no one could keep up with the names. Even the local church managed to keep people at a safe distance from one another.

So the man instructed his family to come together in a room every day to talk and live like a family. But each child was becoming his own person, shaping his own destiny, and the room was cold.

Then the December blizzards came. The man's family huddled under piles of blankets. In desperation, the man had workers add layers of pink insulation around the outside walls. Experts knew just how thick the insulation had to be. There was a technology to deal with inclement weather, another to fight illness, another to escape gravity's pull, and another to make plants produce more food. If people didn't have the appropriate technology to overcome a certain problem, they would invent one.

The days of raging blizzards turned into weeks of subzero temperatures. The Christian man was bewildered. He wondered how he might have built his home differently.

Then one bitter January morning the man awoke to find himself all alone. A note on the kitchen table explained, "We've gone to look for a house with a fire burning in the fireplace."

To be practical in this discussion, we must first come to terms with the coldness of our world. We use names like pluralism, self-determinism, presuppositionalism, self-actualization (Mazlov-Rogers), the Post-modern Era to

describe a world in which there are no absolute values, no core of ethical standards to guide social interaction. Every person is viewed as an inviolable entity. Our families operate in this environment. We can hate its pagan influence, but we will need to get over the notion that we can insulate ourselves against the tidal wave of unbelief. Our homes are very leaky.

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Furthermore, we must recognize that families are not even what is really at stake here; nor is the survival of community, a church, a synod, a nation, a way of life, a culture, or a civilization. What is at stake here is the stuff of eternity— souls.

We must learn to make the distinction between warmth trapped by the insulation and real heat generated by a crackling fire in the hearth.

The Bible makes that distinction profoundly simple and practical for us by drawing us a picture of the world in which we live, as God sees it. The sketch begins with a vertical stroke to describe a relationship shattered by sin but then repaired at an unimaginable cost. Then it draws a second stroke—an intersecting horizontal beam to define new and loving relationships with one another. A work of divine artistry, this masterpiece has movement and balance. It directs our attention *upward* and *outward*.

The beam is meaningless without post. And both lines intersect at a single point—a person, Jesus Christ—the center of God's universe and ours. The fire in our family hearth burns warmly and brightly when we first "seek his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus is the center of the Christian family. We need to speak his name often, with reverence and love. Family members need to speak of him in the past, the present, and the future tenses. He was, is, and will be the key player in everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen to our families. *Everything* in Scripture needs to be seen as connecting to Jesus. Every *thing* in life needs to be understood as it relates to Jesus.

D I S C U S S I O N

How did the influences of capitalism, urbanization, mass communication, and the promises of technology each contribute to the coldness that was leaking into this house? List some of the positive things the man did that failed to provide the heat his family needed.

Read John 20:30,31. How does this text relate to the sketch of the cross?

Read Acts 4:12. Why must Jesus be viewed as the center of the devotional (Christian) home?

Read Revelation 21:5,6. Why is it so important to speak about Jesus in the past, present, and future?

Read John 5:39. Is it possible to study the Bible and still miss out on eternal life?

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We study God's Word to grow in our ability to defend ourselves and others against false doctrine.

Four years ago the Master called me into another phase of his work. (He and I are still going around on this one.) The call letter was vague: ". . . develop a family devotional magazine." Hmmm. The calling body probably didn't have a clue about how or where I should begin either. I decided to ask ordinary folks (real people, not pastors or teachers) what they thought developing a devotional magazine meant. It was a good move.

I spent the next year interviewing Christian parents, individually and in groups. I asked intimate questions lik "How's the spiritual life of your home?" (That's like ask-

ing folks about their sex life.) Mostly I think they responded with honest answers.

Some hung their heads in shame; the devotional climate in their homes wasn't good. They hardly ever prayed before or after meals. They never read Bible stories to their children. They forgot to pray at bedtime or in the morning. Some of this group had tried to start a program of formal devotional readings, but most of them had abandoned the idea, never to return to it. Family discussions, problem-solving, decision-making, discipline, or relationship-building rarely turned to Scripture for enlightenment in the process; nor did biblical principles consciously enter those discussions.

A few (very few) were able to elaborate on the inner workings of their spiritual life as a family. As a result of these interviews, I concluded that the number of mature devotional models in our church body is very small.

The tyranny of false doctrine is rooted as much in our own insecurity as it is rooted in the lies of false teachers.

Time and a hurried lifestyle was always cited as the main obstacle. Leadership and communication issues followed. (The three seem to be linked.) But further discussion often unearthed a fourth concern—a deeper issue—which, quite simply put, was a sense of *incompetence*. They lacked confidence in their ability to share even the simple truths of Scripture with one another and their children. How shall we solve that problem?

About the time *Wellspring* was published, a young pastor told me he was going to press hard to get it into every home in his congregation (Good man!), . . . just as soon as he had developed a workshop on how to *do* home devotions. A part of me wanted to cheer. How we long for wise, well-informed, bright parents who lead their families deeper into the honey pot! But another part of me was troubled by the implication that those of us entrusted with public ministry belong to a caste of spiritually elite. The apostle Paul found a different solution.

Paul seems to have been up against a similar situation with the members of the congregation in Rome. Many of his members there were new to the faith. Many of them lacked an Old Testament background. Logic might have suggested that Paul run these fledglings through a workshop or a parenting seminar before sending them on their way to share God's truth with others. Or he could have inferred that, for the time being, all spiritual talk should emanate from him. But he didn't. He told them,"I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Romans 15:14).

Paul saw them as forgiven people, reborn, covered with the righteous blood of their Savior. Paul described them as "complete in knowledge." He wasn't measuring their intellect, their IQ, or their educational background. He wasn't even counting how many Bible classes or church services they had attended. He was commenting on spiritual knowledge. He was talking about their *faith*. And it was a complete faith. As Paul saw it, two divinely given resources made them fully competent to share Jesus with others: they had Jesus' goodness, and they knew it!

We need to believe in our own hearts that the dads and moms of our churches have the God-given resources to share Jesus in the privacy of their own homes . . . and beyond.

"Think of what you were when you were called. . . . God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Many parents are just waiting for encouragement to be gospel ministers to their own households—and perhaps, unfortunately, our permission.

The tyranny of false doctrine is rooted as much in our

own insecurity as it is rooted in the lies of false teachers. The only way to deal with insecurity is to grow in confidence—to become sure that, in Christ, we are able and competent. We can't foster such growth with messages that alternate between 'You can do it because you have the God-given resources' and 'I'm more able than you.' We can't tear down what little confidence parents have by confusing a human wisdom, which puts the emphasis on brain power, with spiritual wisdom, which we know as faith in Jesus. We just can't allow arrogance or condescension to creep into our ministry.

Tell parents they are good, not in and of themselves, but in Jesus. Remind them that they are competent to instruct one another because their faith is complete and whole.

Tell them about Moses. He felt inadequate: "What if the people . . . ?" "What if Pharaoh . . . ?" God's answer: "I will be with you. I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (Exodus 4).

Tell them what Paul wrote to the Christians of Corinth: "I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom . . . I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling." (1 Corinthians 2:1,3).

One of the beauties of Scripture is its richness. Children can understand its utter simplicity while even the brightest intellect can mine it for new discoveries. Heavenly honey comes to us in a tightly wrapped package of interlocking truths—a net or system. While the Spirit provides us with a saving faith that is complete and whole from the moment that he implants it in our hearts, our understanding of his plan for us grows with each new venture into his Word. Bit by bit, one piece of the puzzle after another falls into place until it becomes a mature belief system.

Repetition in hearing the same truths over and over are important in the same way that a body builder needs reps to keep his muscles in tone. But it is even more important that our daily contact with the Word is aimed at grasping the fullness of God's whole system of truth. This web (Jesus called it *everything I have commanded you*) is the key to defending ourselves and the church from creeping false doctrine.

D I S C U S S I O N

Identify several mature devotional family models from Scripture. Explain your choices.

Read Romans 12:3. Think of subtle ways in which the church might unintentionally leave the impression that some members are not competent to share the gospel with other people.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16. How is spiritual maturity linked to family talk? How can pastors and teachers prepare parents for their role as the spiritual leaders of their own families?

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We study God's Word to be warned against all the sins which offend God and to perceive the need for daily repentance.

Fill in the blank. *Devotional life in the Christian home begins with*_____ . The word I am looking for is *listening*.

Listening is a very difficult concept to grasp and come to terms with. Products of the "Me Generation" have no one to listen to but themselves. Pastors and teachers usually engage in a lot more talking than listening. Listening theory seems almost incompatible with our evangelical objective, which is *to tell*.

Furthermore, some kinds of listening need to be viewed with a cautious eye. Consensus-building and peer pressure, both of which are kinds of listening activity, can lead people astray if they involve listening to the wrong people.

But another kind of listening is vital to the devotional home, because it determines how law and gospel will be presented.

Law and gospel each have a distinct purpose: law to bring the sinner to his knees in repentance and to set a standard for living in obedience to the Lord of his life; gospel, to heal the sin-sick heart with the power of God's forgiveness and to change the heart so that the individual now desires to please God. For Christians, both law and gospel are good. For unbelievers, the law is bad because it condemns, and the gospel is pure foolishness. Law and gospel work together to bring about the Spirit's desired results.

While law and gospel work together, they must remain distinct entities, separate in their application to the Christian's life. We need to hear both. But sometimes, when our sins are bothering us and we doubt God's love, we need to hear more gospel than law. At other times, when our rebellious human side seems to be getting control of us and we are unwilling to repent, we need to hear more law than gospel. There are also those times when we're ready to do God's will, but we're confused about how he wants us to proceed. A review of his law then shows us the way.

Honey tastes best in the intimacy of a loving relationship and the immediacy of the moment.

For pastors, Christian educators, and publishers, this distinct application of law and gospel presents an unusual problem. Whether one is addressing a church full of members, a classroom full of children, or a subscription base of redeemed sinners, it is impossible to know which individuals need to hear more law and which need to hear more gospel. So we listen and try to understand collective needs.

Working with a specific Bible text helps. Texts generally emphasize law or gospel. So the onus of balance falls on the pericope (the list of texts being used), and the needs of all individuals will be fairly represented.

When Christian parents make use of prepared devotional materials, they are at the mercy of a publisher (and his pericope). [As a matter of principle, *Lutheran Parent's Wellspring* devotions strive for balance by presenting both law and gospel in every devotion without injecting one or the other into a discussion unnaturally. We are also committed to maintaining a good law/gospel balance in our pericope.] But published devotions and formal readings are only a small part of the devotional home's full curriculum.

The most valuable devotional opportunities just happen. Educators call these "teachable moments." A skinned knee, a stolen lunch, an unkind word—there isn't an issue that can't be connected with law or gospel. Parents need to know how to grasp these precious opportunities, because each one of them can lead to a spiritual adventure. And that's where listening comes in. Honey tastes best in the intimacy of a loving relationship and the immediacy of the moment.

Parents, in particular, need encouragement and guidance in listening. Family members are frequently impatient with one another. Each of us has become our own person. We want results NOW. We don't take the time to try to understand one another's real spiritual situation. The bottom line of our relationship—of our dealing with one another—is usually rooted in the law. The law gets quick action. It's effective. But sometimes it isn't even God's law that we call into action, it's our own.

Listening is an art. Almost everyone recognizes that listening is vital for meaningful communication. Almost no one ever talks about *how to listen*. So, how do we become good listeners?

Listening Theory 101. We begin by letting another person tell a story. All meaningful communication begins with our stories—our experiences. The key question is *What happened?*

Everyone has a story to share. In fact, we all have thousands of stories to tell (if we only had someone to lis-

ten). People begin to share themselves by telling their stories.

But there is a deeper level that will eventually need to be penetrated if real communication is to occur. (Psychology operates at this deeper level.) It is the level of *feelings*—of venting, emoting, and expressing. The key question is *How do you feel about your story?*

Given a chance to tell the whole story, most people are willing also to share their feelings regarding their story. Mental health depends on venting and emoting. But emotions still aren't the deepest level of our being.

At the heart of every person exists a complex core of deeply personal, highly subjective beliefs. We protect these beliefs; we treasure them; we periodically reshape them in the light of new insights. If genuine communication is the objective, we will have to understand that core of beliefs.

The key question is *Why?*or *What is your truth?* Why are you angry, or afraid, or anxious, or happy, or hurt, et cetera? The *truth* you get will be highly subjective—a perception at best. Nevertheless, the question is important. It helps the parent understand the issues and the child's perspective. This is especially important when parents are trying to decide if a child's heart is repentant and in need of the comfort of the gospel, or is hardening in sin and in need of hearing the law.

Parents need to be encouraged to spend time with their children, talking about the important things of life. That's the best way to make teachable moments appear more frequently. The decision to apply law or gospel to any given situation is among the most difficult challenges for a Christian parent. And environment that fosters open and honest communication—speaking the truth in love—can go a long way toward helping parents meet that challenge.

One final thought before we leave this matter of presenting law and gospel. With few exceptions, parents are able to describe their own application of law as strict (many rules, rigidly enforced) or lenient (few rules, enforced with a lot of flexibility). What often gets shortshrift in our homes is a specific discussion of sin.

Parents need to present sin as a part of the belief system. People need to *realize* the power of sin. Families need to talk more about the nature of sin, the absolute consequences of sin, its dreadful lure even for believer, and its awful potential for destroying faith. Sin has to be presented as being real, powerful, deadly.

On that happy note, we'll move on.

D I S C U S S I O N

Think of several examples of good listening from Scripture.

Read Romans 12:10. How does this text contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a good listener?

Your eight-year-old comes in sobbing. Use the listening taxonomy described above *(What happened? How do you feel? What is your truth? What does God say?)* to construct a teachable moment in which you end up talking about what God has to say.

Read Jeremiah 30:11-17. Why is it so important to understand sin in its most devastating reality?

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We study God's Word to learn how God wants us to act in all situations of life.

The Christian's life is a laboratory. We hear the Master's voice and then practice his words in our own lives (Matthew 7).

If life is the lab, the Christian home is the anteroom. There little minds and hearts are engaged with one another and with parents in the microcosm of family. Concepts like justice, compassion, and forgiveness find expression in the simple, mundane, and casual lessons of day-to-day living. In the words of the apostle Paul, Scripture is there to *teach*, *rebuke*, *correct*, and *train in righteous living* (2 Timothy 3:16).

For the Christian parent, that usually means that a child's faith will find new expression *next time*. (The words *next time* may be the most practical words in the English language for making sanctified applications of Bible truth to real life.)

But once again we may find ourselves having to overcome an obstacle of our own making. Let me explain.

Pictures shape our world far more than words.

One of the richest blessings of childhood is a vivid imagination. Children are able to see things in a way most adults no longer can. What kids lack in real-life experience is compensated for exponentially by an imagination able to construct impossible images to explain their world.

In response to a teacher who asked a three-year-old how Jesus got into her heart, a little girl replied, "He just walked in on my tongue and slid right down." Fantasy? Absolutely. But probably not much less theologically correct an explanation for faith than you or I might construct.

Parents need to see imagination as a wide-open door of opportunity. But grownups have a tendency to intellectualize everything; we analyze, synthesize, and construct paradigms to make sense out of life.

Not so for kids! Children think in pictures. In our culture that is a real advantage. Our world thrives on images. The graphics that flash by our eyes daily leave lasting impressions and move us to action. Pictures shape our world far more than words.

Adult Christians often intellectualize God's truth too. Spiritual maturity is mistakenly equated with Bible literacy. Getting children *into* the Word frequently implies intellectual exercise instead of internalizing truth—facts instead of faith.

Perhaps we ought to refer to the Bible as *God's Pictures* rather than *God's Word*. Maybe that would help us remember that the Bible is constructed in a way that helps us understand who God is and what he has done for us. Frequently that comes to us in the form of vivid imagery.

And the imagery God uses to reveal himself to us is rich and diverse. A dwelling place. An innocent lamb. A farmer. Light. A fragrant offering of incense. A vinestem. Bread. A stream of living water. A bridegroom. The wind. A king. A father. A judge. A stairway to heaven. Pictures of God's power and grace that cannot be erased from our mind's eye! He walks on water. He rescues men from furnaces. He heals lepers. He restores the dead to life. He stops the flow of rivers. He casts out demons.

There are snapshots of us and our contemporaries there too: smoking flax, salt, wineskins, clay pots, stonework in a massive temple, body parts, white-washed burial caves, lost-and-found children, wheat, wandering sheep.

And always, in every word picture, we see relationships, and we begin to apply God's truth to our lives by putting ourselves into the picture.

God's truth is presented in Scripture in simple, practical ways. One of our greatest challenges in ministry to the devotional family is to eliminate so much of what seems to be a tangle of intellectual concepts, and show people that salvation is anything but abstract or theoretical. We need to help people see themselves in God's pictures.

D I S C U S S I O N

Read Deuteronomy 4:9. How are adult memories and a child's imagination connected? How is imagination connected with faith?

Select a favorite word-picture from Scripture and make an application of the truth it teaches to something going on in your life today.

Read Mark 4:10-12. How does faith affect one's understanding of God's truth?

Read Matthew 19:14. How might we hinder children from coming to know their Savior without even knowing that we have done so?

At every turn the Bible shocks us with God's unexpected mercy and grace.

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We study God's Word to find pleasure.

Recently, I travelled in Israel, doing some sightseeing. On the highway leading from the Judean Desert up to Jerusalem, we passed several Bedouin encampments perched on the hillsides. Things haven't changed much there in 2,000 years. Shepherd boys tend their flocks. Women move about their tent-dwellings, doing domestic chores—certainly worth a few minutes to stop and capture the nostalgia on film.

Within seconds Bedouin children shouting "Dollah! Dollah!" surrounded us, thrusting grubby, outstretched hands in our faces. Their odor registered first. They probably had not bathed, used proper toilet facilities, or had a clean change of clothing in months. They were disgusting! Eyes watered; mucous ran from their nostrils; sores covered their lice-infested scalps. Some of the tinier ones coughed a terrible croup.

I dug into my pocket for a few shekels to keep them at bay, being careful not to make physical contact and to hang on to my camera.

Safely back on the road, I began to reflect on a profound irony that I had not appreciated before. People like these shepherds were among the very first to hear the news that the world's Savior had been born in nearby Bethlehem. God chose people like these children, whom I found so revolting, to hear and see a celestial choir filling the night skies with a song of unparalleled majesty and splendor. For an instant I comprehended, if only crudely, the contrast between the inestimable heavenly glory from which the Savior came and the stark humility that life on earth would mean for him. What divine irony!

If you will pardon the pun, Scripture is *dripping* with irony. The Author of Life, and of our faith, has quite literally written the most moving story of all time. How ironic that a Father, worthy only of our respect and adoration, yet the object of our scorn and humiliating rejection, would, for love, extend to us prodigals the warmth and security of his heavenly home!

At every turn the Bible shocks us with God's unexpected mercy and grace. The King come to be our servant. A High Priest, but also a sacrificial lamb who mediates on our behalf directly at God's throne. The fulfillment of ancient prophets, yet himself the great Prophet, preaching God's New Covenant to lifeless hearts that, on their own, couldn't care less. Irony on top of irony! Surprise after glorious surprise! A story line that doesn't quit! How good God must be to love such miserable, undeserving creatures like us! I am still jolted by that concept. It takes my breath away every time it passes through conscious thought.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis described how his childhood faith quickly eroded when he failed to acknowledge *joy* in his life. He wrote, "The

authentic Joy had vanished from my life so completely that not even the memory or the desire of it remained. . . . Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general, but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing." Lewis' *authentic joy* reminds me of my passionate love for baklava; or, much more to the spiritual point, the *stab*, the *pang*, the *longing* for holy honey.

Conversely, Lewis' description of how authentic joy had so thoroughly vanished from his life is an uncanny description of quite a few Christian families. One surely has to ask, Where is their joy? Have they traded in the astonishing surprise of being free from the eternal grip of sin, death, and Satan's power for human pleasures?

To be practical, our families need to see the differences between pleasures of life and genuine joy. We need to see the Good News as generating new life day after day. Even though we have heard God's story thousands of times, we need to continue to be surprised by God's unexpected grace. Like Jeremiah, our joy is rekindled daily, knowing that ". . . because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is [his] faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22,23).

We can rejoice, like those poor, ancient shepherds did, pondering the irony of it all. We can know the same joy that Peter and Mary knew when they were lifted from the dark despair of Good Friday to the soaring ecstasy of Easter's empty tomb. The old gospel message can't ever be "same-ol' same-ol'" it is just too shocking. The unbelievability of it is enough to take our breath away every time we think of it.

Joy is a noun. The related verb, *rejoice*, describes the natural response to joy. Rejoicing implies a celebration.

Celebrating joy confirms the joy one feels. It is overt. It can, and often does, transfer to others, but it is primarily an expression for our own benefit.

Celebrating the joy of God's goodness can be captured in two simple words: *Giving thanks!* It sounds almost too simple, but it's true. Thankful people say *thank you*. They are surprised by the Giver's overwhelming generosity. They express their joy at having received a gift. Their appreciation is profuse and verbalized. And the gift is acknowledged to others so that the joy can be shared. In the spiritual setting we call it *worship*.

You don't just eat holy honey, you celebrate it! Thankful hearts are joyful hearts, and joyful hearts rejoice; they celebrate. They know the source of every blessing and they take the time and make the effort to say thank you so that they never forget.

This is the most salient argument for daily spiritual activity in the home of the Christian family. Families that know they are receiving God's good spiritual gifts anew each day have a reason to give thanks each day.

In the family setting, this kind of celebrating takes commitment. It requires a conscious resolve to express appreciation and gratitude to God in prayers or songs or readings. (The psalms are especially effective as a family worship tool because they express joy so well.) Our own rejoicing can be an otherwise untapped fountain of spiritual blessings. Our job is to help families turn on the tap.

We need to talk about the family altar concept (not a place, but an attitude), where time is set aside for family members to worship God together every day. Home worship involves a different social dynamic than the one found in a congregational setting. It will take some getting used to. New skills and attitudes will need to be learned—discussion skills, leadership attitudes. Nevertheless, family worship is an important part of a devotional lifestyle.

D I S C U S S I O N

Read 1 Peter 1:3-9. List all of the spiritual gifts noted here by Peter as the reason for our unprecedented joy.

Read Romans 14:17. How does a joy-filled life serve God?

Read Jeremiah 15:16. What is the source for the Christian's joy? Then read Saint Luke's brief account of the apostles returning to Jerusalem after Jesus had ascended into heaven (24:32). How do Christians express their joy?

Read Acts 2:42-47. Describe the effects of joy on the early church.

What would you say to someone who is convinced that the only proper place to worship God is church? How does this attitude undermine the devotional home? To what degree does this attitude exist in our church?

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We study God's Word to be motivated to do things that are pleasing to God. This includes sharing his Word with others.

In the family setting, our lives are of epic importance to others.

Have you ever wondered, as the Christian man in the parable, what good a family is if its members stop laughing together, talking together, and working together? That's a very practical question. We might challenge our members to ask themselves that very question. It drives us right back to the vertical post and horizontal beam of the cross—the double theme: *upward and outward.*

The question of God's purpose for family has two correct responses, because we live in two dimensions: one foot firmly planted in heaven in a relationship with our heavenly Father (upward), the other still here on earth, where our lives mingle with the lives of others (outward).

The demoniac, freed of the devil's powerful grip on his life, wanted to remain in the rare air—the first dimension. Jesus wouldn't let him. He told the man to go home and share all that had happened to him with the members of his household (Mark 5).

Family is the social context in which we begin to learn about that second dimension. In the family setting we practice concepts Jesus taught—justice, compassion, relationship-building.

In the family setting, our lives are of epic importance to others. We may pursue personal renewal through private meditation in a secluded environment, as Jesus often did, but we dare not permit our private meditation to become our exclusive devotional model. We have an obligation to extend God's grace in our lives to the lives of others.

Have you ever told your children how you came to faith in Jesus? Have you ever shared the story of how you met their mother or father? Have you explained how much your baptism means to you? Have you told a son or daughter about the time God led another person desperately in need of spiritual help, to you? It may seem boring to you, but it won't be boring to other members of your family because their history is bound up in yours. They want to know the good stuff and the bad stuff. They want to hear all about how you've dealt with life's trials and crises. They want to see God's miracle of faith at work in your life.

What stories we have to tell! Thousands of them, all leading us back to Jesus, the center of God's universe, and ours. To stretch the metaphor to its limit, we are living honey to the people around us (hence the title for this series of essays).

Be practical! Don't just tell the members of your family *God loves them*; tell them *he loves you*, and share with them the experiences from your life that make you certain of his promises and his love.

D I S C U S S I O N

Read 2 Corinthians 3:2,3. If Paul describes the Christians at Corinth as "tablets of human hearts," is it appropriate

for us to describe our lives as *living honey?* Explain your answer.

How do we become witnesses to God's grace by sharing our experiences and stories?

Read Colossians 3:1-17. This portion of Scripture is an excellent model for the devotional home. List all the noteworthy details in this description that are significant elements in the life of a Christian family.

Tips for the Devotional Home

- Surround your formal spiritual activities, such as devotional readings, with informal talk. Discuss the news in the light of Bible principles. Share political opinions or cultural insights in the Bible's light. Pray with one another about common everyday occurrences.

- Remain flexible in choosing the times in which you plan to hold formal devotions. Anytime is a good time to think about God and talk about his love. And don't get hung up on having every member of the family present for every devotion. Jesus said that he would be present even when just two or three members of the family were meeting in his name.

- When there isn't a lot of time for a formal devotional activity, do short things—read a short psalm, sing one verse of a hymn, or invite one member of the family to recite a favorite Bible verse; then ask someone else to make a personal comment about that text.

- Choose devotional material appropriate to the age levels of your children. Very young children need simple word-pictures to help them understand a concept. Children in the lower grades are into defining words. Middle grade children like to study topical subjects. Teens are issue-oriented and need to be challenged with problem-solving opportunities.

- Get everyone involved in discussions. Don't let anyone, including parents, dominate the devotional conversation. Give everyone a chance to contribute.

- Special celebrations and significant family events are appropriate times for doing formal devotional or family worship activities. Don't let birthdays, anniversaries, or the first day in a new school year slip by without considering an encouragement from Scripture and saying a prayer together.