

### God-Saturated Homes - 3

I once read a deeply saddening article. It was by a young lady by the name of Meghan O’Gieblyn. In the article, she describes how through her pre-teen and later years, she followed one Christian rock group and pop group after another, through the various fads and fashions of the 90s and early 2000s. She describes how as she grew up in this environment, she saw how the church tried to keep up with the marketing techniques of the world, to make itself supposedly relevant, trendy, cool and attractive.

This is how she finishes the article. “... I continued to call myself a Christian into my early twenties. When I finally stopped, it wasn’t because being a believer made me uncool or outdated or freakish. It was because being a Christian no longer meant anything. It was a label to slap on my Facebook page, next to my music preferences. The gospel became just another product someone was trying to sell me, and a paltry one at that ... In trying to compete in this market, the church has forfeited the one advantage it had in the game to attract disillusioned youth: authenticity. ..If Christian leaders weren’t so ashamed of those unvarnished values, they might have something more attractive than anything on today’s bleak moral market. In the meantime, they’ve lost one more kid to the competition.”

One more. One more of many. As we have pointed to, George Barna's studies showed that 6 out of 10 people who grow up in evangelical churches permanently abandon the faith when they are in their twenties. These are people who sit in Sunday School and church, pray the sinner's prayer, give us their testimonies before baptism, attend the youth groups and are regulars in church with their parents. But two thirds of them do not simply choose other churches, they choose other gods. They abandon Christianity altogether.

In this series, we have been trying to answer the question of why this happens again and again. We've suggested the answer is that many Christian homes have not obeyed Deuteronomy 6:4-9. That is, although they may profess to know God, God has not been the ultimate love of the home. God has not been the ultimate trust, the ultimate commitment, or the ultimate satisfaction. That kind of love for God has not been taught, either by direct instruction, or by observed actions.

In other words, the homes have been practically secular. Though there is a creed in place, and there might be some prayer before meals, God is mostly absent from conversations, goals, priorities, plans, or activities. God is more like an invisible therapist for when you're down, an unseen motivational speaker for when you're aimless, and a concealed psychologist for when you're guilty. But He's not treated as if he is ultimate reality, whose existence explains everything we know. Children who grow up in these homes have a faith like a mere egg-shell, and it doesn't take much for it to be crushed altogether.

Children which grow up in homes where God is loved wholeheartedly, and where that love for God is communicated in various ways, will most often go on to make that faith their own, and teach it to their children.

Last week, we considered three ways that parents teach love for God. It begins with internalising the Word of God. These words need to be in parents' hearts. Regenerated hearts, new hearts, hearts born from above that then take in God's Word and store it up, treasure it, learn it. Second, from that overflow comes direct instruction, teaching. Whether at devotions, or at the dinner table, or during times of correction, or struggle, or decision-making, whether at home or traveling, in the morning at night, there is to be instruction. And we saw, thirdly, that a teacher does not simply say, he does. She does not merely verbally instructs, she models. So love for God is taught by observed example: the children see what it means for God to be your ultimate dependence, your ultimate devotion, and your ultimate delight.

But we're not finished with Deuteronomy 6, because there is more there. It is more implicit than explicit, but it is clearly there, and something repeated in many other Scriptures.

God knows that we are not only shaped from the inside out, with teaching and truth that is in our hearts and minds and then fleshes out. We are also shaped from the outside in. We are embodied beings. We inhabit time and space. How we experience time, and what we do with our bodies has a powerful shaping effect on our lives.

As we'll see, God did more than give people truths and concepts for their minds. In dealing with Israel, He also fleshed those truths out into truths that affected time, and space.

As we consider Deuteronomy 6:7-9, we see a further two ways that we are to teach ultimate love for God: your routines, and your rituals.

## **I. Our Use of Time Should Teach Ultimate Love for God**

"You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Here God tells Israel that their teaching and talking about loving God must take place when they sit in the house, and when they walk by the way, when they lie down and when they rise up.

On one level, God is simply pointing out how this discipling relationship must take place formally and informally, indoors and outdoors. But in another way, God's words suggest the rhythm and routine of life. *When you sit in the house* is the time of day when you are at home, *when you walk by the way* is the time of day when you go out. *When you lie down* is the time of day when you sleep, *when you rise up* is the time of day when you wake from your sleep. Here is a suggestion of a cycle of events, of a routine, a rhythm of life – getting up in the morning, going out, coming back, lying down to sleep. Not only are you to teach about loving God routinely, but your routine itself communicates something. Your daily, and weekly, and monthly and even yearly routine teaches your family about ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion, ultimate love.

Think of what this looked like for the ancient Israelite.

If he was anywhere near the Tabernacle or later, the Temple, he would have seen a routine: a burnt offering twice daily, and a meal offering twice daily – one in the morning, and one in the evening – when the day's activity begins and when it ceases. There would be a sacrifice every Sabbath, and a sacrifice at the beginning of each month.

Once a week, he had to observe very specific things about the Sabbath. Every Sabbath was a rest day. There were sacrifices at the special feasts of Unleavened Bread, Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles. He was to observe these special days. A male Israelite had to go to the Tabernacle or Temple three times a year: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles.

For the Israelite, his daily routine involved reciting the Shema in the morning and in the evening. At breakfast or lunch or supper, his restricted diet reminded him to put a difference between the holy and the common. He thought of God.

When he began the day by working the land, there were laws regarding the animals, laws regarding sowing, tilling and reaping, which caused him to think on God.

If he went to transact business, there were laws about money and equity.

When the day was over and he went home, there were laws about ritual cleanness.

What did this routine communicate to him? God is at the centre of life. God is the ultimate reality. God is the One we love ultimately, because He is ultimate reality.

We see this consecration of our time, in several other places in Scripture.

"Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days." (Daniel 6:10)

In Psalm 55:17, David writes, "Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice." David structured his day around communion with God. Quite similar to Daniel, David seems to have a routine of thrice-daily prayer.

What about the New Testament? In Acts 6:31, we read "Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour." Peter and John did not abandon the Jewish tradition of observed prayer times, but brought it into New Testament life.

Paul expected a routine in the lives of believers because he writes in 1 Corinthians 16:2 "On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper..."

He expected believers to follow a weekly pattern of stewardship and worship, showing the value of set routines.

This is the opposite of secularism which tries to sideline God to the margins of life, relegating Him to a once-a-week appearance. Secularism has a daily routine in which God is invisible. Secularism has a routine which acts as if God does not matter.

A New Testament Christian does not have the exactly the same situation as the Israelite but he or she still has a daily routine, and that routine either has God present when you lie down and rise up, sit in the house or walk by the way or it doesn't.

How does each day typically begin? Is there anything of God in it? Does the day start with some kind of reading of the Word and prayer? Is there some equivalent of the morning sacrifice?

How does the day end? Is there anything of God in it? Are there perhaps some devotions, some thanksgiving prayers before bedtime, or some music which honours God played? Is there some equivalent of the evening sacrifice?

What kind of music routinely plays in the background? What sort of movies or TV programmes routinely play on the screen? Is the order of the day a home of distraction, or a home of reflection? When the days of rest come around, what is the routine there?

What is the habit around mealtimes, particularly dinnertime? Who is honoured for providing – which is, after all, why Dad was out all day – working hard so that God would be pleased to bless the home with provision. What is discussed at the table?

What are the weekly habits regarding when the church meets? Sundays. What is the Saturday-night routine?

One of the keys to learning is repetition. What is repeated over and over again is learnt, memorized, internalised. The habits of your home, become a kind of rhythm that your children learn to get in step with. Whatever is regularly, consistently done says, this is important. This is necessary. This is essential.

How often I have met believers whose parents were diligent in attending church whenever possible. Now as adults, they will look back and say, “We almost never missed a service.” They don't remember all the services, or the content of the services – but they remember the routine. It came to characterise their lives – it made a deep impression. And for many of these adults, they have come to have the same routine in their lives.

The habits of your home, its rhythms, its routines display where the ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion and ultimate delight are.

However, verses 8-9 seem to show us a second way that we can teach ultimate love for God.

## II. Our Use of Traditions Should Teach Ultimate Love for God

<sup>8</sup> "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. <sup>9</sup> "You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God is talking about His commandments being taught. But here he speaks about these commandments becoming almost visible: a sign on your hand, a frontlet between your eyes, written on doorposts and gates. Now how does a command from the Word take flesh, and become visible? The answer is an outward practice, an observance. You could call it a custom, a kind of ceremony, or ritual. When you have a kind of observance that becomes a custom, you can also call it a tradition.

God says these are some of the most memorable teaching tools of all.

**Exodus 12:24-27** <sup>24</sup> "And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. <sup>25</sup> "It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. <sup>26</sup> "And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' <sup>27</sup> "that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.' "

Notice that the observance provoked a question from the child. That's the idea. Any well-planned observance has all kinds of symbols and procedures and manners which have meaning. It's the joy of children to observe and wonder, and the joy of parents to explain.

But perhaps someone says, “All that ritual belonged to the Old Testament. The New Testament is free of ceremony and form and that kind of thing.” Not true. What is baptism, but a ceremony, a ritual, in which we use a symbol to convey a deep, transcendent meaning?

What is the Lord's Supper except an observance, ritual, a ceremony in which we use various symbols to convey special meaning? In fact, every Sunday worship service is a ceremony, in which we read the Scriptures, pray the Scriptures, sing the Scriptures and preach the Scriptures.

God is not against observances, traditions, ceremony. Weddings are rituals, ceremonies done on special occasions. All that we do at that ceremony has meaning – the way the bride and groom are dressed, what music is played, what is said, the rings. Funerals are rituals and ceremonies. The way we dress, what we sing, the order, how we treat the body of the deceased is all part of the meaning we convey. Birthdays are ceremonies. Graduations are ceremonies.

He is against ceremony and ritual without meaning, without heart. He is against ceremony which is unbiblical or promotes a false gospel.

I'm afraid too many Christians have taken in a kind of Gnosticism without knowing it. Gnosticism was a false teaching present in the early centuries of the church. One of the things that Gnosticism taught was that the body is evil and the spirit is good. Consequently, anything to do with the body, such as eating, drinking, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching is seen as unspiritual and carnal or inferior, and the really spiritual focus on things like prayer and inner meditation.

But that is completely unbiblical. When God wants to remind us of the death of Jesus Christ, what does He have us do? We remember the Lord's death by eating and drinking – a ceremony that involves very physical, tangible elements. When we want to show that we are disciples of Christ, what do we do? We are immersed in water, a physical, tangible ceremony that depicts the truth. When we come together to worship, he tells us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and that very audible music rings in our ears as we do so. God is not against the use of food, clothing, colour, music to teach and to instruct.

God has made us as embodied beings, and and outwardly observable and tangible customs shape us. It is memorable. They emphasize importance and value. When it is explained, it teaches and instructs and shapes the heart in powerful ways. He wanted his people to have in their lives enough signs, enough things which pointed to ultimate truths.

James Bannerman (1807–1868, Free Church of Scotland) “Customs and traditions, if agreeable to the Word and conducive to reverence and edification, may lawfully be retained. What Scripture does not command, it may yet allow, provided the church does not command where God has not.”

So then the application comes to us: what kind of rituals or ceremonies are in our families that continually communicate ultimate love for God?

First of all, there is the weekly gathering with God's people, which families attend. In the Old testament, the Bible makes a point of saying that when Israel gathered before the Lord, “ Now all Judah, with their little ones, their wives, and their children, stood before the LORD.” Corporate worship is a ceremony and ritual that the family should prepare for and look to and honour. We spoke last week about how our attitude towards Sunday worship communicates what we are devoted to and what we delight in.

But beyond that, the time of worship itself communicates all kinds of truths about God. Once again, there may be many things in the worship service which the children wonder at. But that is an opportunity for parents to explain later.

The ceremony is not elaborate – there is no incense and special garments. It is reading the Word, singing the Word, praying the Word and preaching the Word. However, that simple worship ought to be regarded very highly. We want that time to be so special in our lives that it enables our children to distinguish between the holy and the common. They recognise God is holy, majestic and to be loved ultimately.

Let's say I didn't believe that. Let's say I wanted to communicate to my child that Sunday worship was ordinary, that Sunday worship was commonplace, that there was nothing transcendent or majestic happening. How might I communicate that to my child? If I wanted him to think that Sunday worship was no different to Monday or Thursday or Friday, then one way would be to dress him like any other day. If the ceremony of Sunday worship is as ordinary as any other day, then make sure the child feels that way. And make sure you dress that same way. But if you wanted him

to think that the Lord's Day is unique, and that worship is something sacred, and not common, you would use the very physical, tangible thing called clothing to help communicate that message. ("God looks at the heart!" yes, but we're not Gnostics. The physical affects the spiritual. If you want your child to feel that the event is casual, then you dress him that way.")

When we are about to worship, we help our children to understand, we're going to do something important, and joyful and serious. That means we have to sit quietly. That's what we would tell them if we were in the Supreme Court, or if we were at a funeral, or at a military memorial.

What about what we do before worship? If we want to communicate how special this day is, we begin preparing beforehand. We get things ready on Saturday night, because not only do we want to avoid the tension that comes from rushing on Sunday morning, but we want to communicate, tomorrow is the Lord's Day. We get ready in advance.

A second ceremony we need to build into our lives is family worship. Family worship does not need to be elaborate, it just needs to be meaningful. A time ideally daily, but realistically several times a week when the whole family gathers, and the father leads by reading the Word, explaining it, helping the family to understand it and apply it, and then to pray it – respond to God in prayer, and even in song.

A third tradition is the family dinner table. The table in Scripture is the place of fellowship, the place of honouring those you love, the place of sacrifice and service, the place of instruction. The dinner table ought to be a ceremony we have every day. We open it with prayer. We eat together. Isn't it interesting how often God instructs us and teaches us love for Him over a meal? Revelation 3:20.

We speak to each other of the day, of its blessings, of its challenges, of its lessons. We laugh together, learn together and enjoy each other. When the dinner table is an event which is beautiful and memorable, it is one of the strongest rituals that will instil the love of God into your family's heart.

But what is fast replacing the dinner table is the TV tray and the coffee table. The television is the only one speaking at meal times, while everyone silently munches away, glaring at the box. No one speaks to each other, encourages each other, loves each other. Instead, everyone just drifts from one another. Fathers, reclaim the dinner table. Reclaim family worship. They will be ceremonies that will inscribe love for God on your children's hearts. They will forget most of the TV shows they watch. They will forget many of the games they play. But they will remember the traditions of the dinner table and family worship.

A fourth kind of ceremony or ritual or tradition can those you build around significant Christian holidays. Yes, the Christian is not commanded to celebrate Christmas or Good Friday or Ascension Day, but what opportunities the Christian holidays present. Part of the reason it is so difficult to reach the Jews is that the ceremonies of Passover and Shavuot and Yom Kippur and Sukkot and Chanukkah and Purim are so memorable and so imprinted on the mind from the earliest age. Those ceremonies and celebrations are stirring, memorable, beautiful and furnish the mind and imagination of the young Jewish child. One of the Jewish traditions was on Pentecost to bring the children in early in the morning, and put honey on their tongues just before reading the Scriptures.

Let me encourage you, even if you do not celebrate Christian holidays, use those days as opportunities to build your own traditions that will teach the truths of those days. Remember, God has given you the pattern in Scripture – we are physical and spiritual beings. We respond to taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing. What can you do that will honour our Saviour's resurrection, and mark that day with significance? On Christmas, what do you do that celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus Christ? What do your ceremonies at home on Good Friday, and Resurrection Sunday

communicate? Just another day? A day for more food? A day for self-indulgence? A day to see extended family? Or can you build real meaning into these days so that loving God is again on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

A fourth kind of ceremony would be ones you develop as a family to mark special days or events. you can develop your own that illustrate or teach God as the ultimate reality. Birthdays. Ceremonies for adolescence, for graduation, for pledges of purity. There are many opportunities to turn events and situations into special occasions with great truths about God taught.

Don't be one of those Christians who dismisses the whole idea of custom, observance, or tradition. If God built ritual and ceremony into Old Testament Israel, if he continued it with us in baptism and the Lord's Supper, we need family rituals and ceremonies which inscribe the love of God on the doorposts and gates of our homes. We need these signs, these symbols which teach truth memorably, powerfully, unforgettably.

The difficulty is that it takes work. It takes work to have a worship service with beauty and unity and meaning. It takes work to have family devotions that are meaningful and regular. It takes work to plan dinners and dinner-time conversation. It takes work to plan traditions and activities associated with biblical events. Ceremonies are costly, when they're done well. But that's exactly why God values them, and wants us to have such signs on our hand.

If we take the case of Megan O' Gieblyn, what would have happened if the daily routine in her homes had suggested – begin with God, and end with God? Where would she have been today if her parents had filled her life with living object lessons in the form of customs – corporate worship, family worship, special days, special events? I cannot say for sure, but I suspect it would look different.

The way we use time, and the way we use traditions imprints the love of God on hearts from the outside in, through our senses, and hopefully into hearts. Jonathan Edwards: “Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ and wholly influenced and governed by His rules.”— Sermon on Family Religion