

Share the Promise With Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

by
Richard Gurgel

Second in a series of Bible studies on parenting written for the Christ-Light religion curriculum
and included in the Strong Roots for Tender Shoots program.

LEADER'S GUIDE



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Notes for Leaders

Share the Promise with Your Children: How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home was written by Richard Gurgel, a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin. This study will work well in both regular Bible study and workshop formats. The Leader's Guide has been designed for use by a congregational leader working with a group of parents. Be aware that some of the participants may not be parents. Be sure to include them in the discussions. Help them understand that everyone has a vital role in encouraging the faith of the next generation.

Comments, suggestions, and explanations designed to help the study leader are included in the Leader's Guide, along with the material that appears on the Parents' Pages. For ease of use, the leader's helps are indented and printed in a different font. The purpose of the helps is not to give "set answers" to be simply handed to the class. This guide aims to give the general flow of thought for each section. It also provides ideas on how to teach the sessions.

Please keep in mind the key goal of this Bible study: We pray that God will use this study to equip and enable parents to **SHARE THE PROMISE** with their children. To equip and enable parents, we need to involve them in studying and reading Scripture. Parents need to discuss how to apply Scripture to their own lives and the lives of their children. They need to share ideas and encourage one another in the area of the highest responsibility they have: to share God's gospel promises with their children. By means of these studies, we hope to promote that kind of involvement by parents.

Discussion is often difficult at the beginning of a Bible study or workshop because it may take time for individuals in a group to become comfortable with one another. It is important, therefore, during the Bible study sessions, to give parents plenty of time to form their thoughts and to express themselves. Their children will be the richer for it.

If your group has more than six to eight people, we encourage the use of the suggested small group discussion sessions. Small group discussions enable quieter members to express themselves in a less threatening setting. In a larger group, their insights and concerns might be lost.

If you use this series in a workshop setting, consider "warming up" the group for the first session. Here is one suggestion: Provide some refreshments at the beginning of the session to allow the participants to visit with one another. Then, after welcoming them to the workshop, ask the individuals or couples to introduce themselves. Have them tell the names and ages of their children and how long they have belonged to your congregation (or if they are prospect families, how long they have been attending services). Also, if they are willing, have them share the expectations they have for the study. In other words, have them tell what they want to gain from this workshop for the benefit of their Christian families. After you have heard them express what they hope to gain, read through the stated purpose and objectives that follow.

Purpose

To help Christian parents make their homes the strongest fortresses of Jesus Christ that they can be, for the spiritual welfare of all in the home.

Objectives

To accomplish that purpose, the leader will strive, through the study of the Word, to

- 1) help Christian parents understand that they have an indispensable and crucially vital role in the spiritual training of their children, which cannot be delegated to teachers or pastors.
- 2) help Christian parents understand the importance of their own spiritual growth through the use of the means of grace at church and at home.
- 3) help Christian parents remember that their children's greatest need is Jesus Christ and his gift of eternal salvation and to help parents see to it that their children meet him regularly in their home.
- 4) offer practical help to Christian parents for reading the Bible on their own, for leading children in home devotions, and for seizing daily opportunities to pass scriptural truths on to the next generation.
- 5) offer encouragement to Christian parents, regarding specific family issues (discipline, communication, and materialism)—areas in which the world pressures them and their children to conform to its ways.

Share the Promise with Your Children is part of a series of four Bible studies designed to provide congregations with biblically sound materials that address the various stages of parenting. While each Bible study can be used profitably on its own, the series forms the foundation for a comprehensive family education program in a congregation. The first Bible study in the series, *Spiritual Rebirth: How to Enjoy and Live the Blessings of Baptism*, is intended for expectant parents and parents of infants and toddlers. It focuses on the blessings of Baptism and on how to live those blessings in daily life. As the second in this series, *Share the Promise with Your Children* is intended especially for parents with children in the primary grades. The last two studies in the series are intended for parents of adolescents and teens.

Overview of Each Session

Session One: Hey, Mom and Dad! YOU Are God's Key People!

Purpose: To remind parents of two important truths: (1) God gave you awesome “parent power” the moment he allowed you to be called Mom and Dad, and (2) the power of God’s grace enables you to accomplish your God-given task.

Session Two: Wanted: Spiritual Parents to Raise Spiritual Children

Purpose: To help parents learn this basic principle of Christian life: repentance, forgiveness, and growth in faith must start with the individual before he or she will be able to teach others. If you want your children to grow in Christ’s Word, you as a parent must continue to grow in his Word.

Session Three: Overcome the Obstacles to Sharing the Promise with Your Children

Purposes: To encourage parents to discuss what prevents them from sharing the Word with their children and to overcome those obstacles with God’s promised help and blessings.

Session Four: Make the Most of Every Opportunity

Purpose: To encourage parents to share God’s revealed promises in their homes, both formally and informally.

Session Five: Love One Another as Dearly Loved Children

Purpose: To give parents specific direction for modeling and living their Christian faith in the areas of discipline, communication, and materialism.

Session Six: Put It to Work (Optional)

A follow-up designed for presentation several weeks after the completion of the regular sessions.

Purpose: To give parents added encouragement to incorporate promise sharing practices in their homes and to discuss any further obstacles that parents may have encountered.

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session One

Hey, Mom and Dad! YOU Are God's Key People!

Introduction

Read Matthew 25:31-46, or refer to Jesus' description of the sheep and goats before his judgment throne.

Imagine that you are standing among the sheep at Jesus' right hand on that glorious day. Suddenly, as you look over at the goats, you see one of your children standing among those headed for eternal damnation.

What an awful thought! All the degrees, good jobs, Little League trophies, and everything else you urged your child to accomplish in life would suddenly become utterly meaningless! The one thing that matters forever would be lost. If you could, you would turn back the hands of time and do things differently. You would make sure that, whenever possible, you would hold before your child that which is eternally important, namely, God's Word.

That is precisely the purpose of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 25. Jesus tells us those words to remind us of the eternal importance of saving faith. He wants us among the sheep. He also encourages us to nurture our children at every opportunity so that they too are with Christ forever in heaven. Yes, it is true: stubborn unbelief can throw away what we offer. But all that God asks of us is to provide the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to unleash his power as we use his Word to accomplish the mission he has given us.

It is important to fulfill that mission in your homes. Christ's mission to reach the world with his Word includes your own homes. You need to keep in mind the final goal—to have your children stand with you among the believers, forever.

That is what this Bible study is about. Today we begin by emphasizing the key role you have as Mom and Dad in your Christian home. Let's look at the special role God designed for Christian parents and also see how he enables you to carry out that role.

Part One: God gives you "parent power" in your home

No human being will have a greater influence on the lives of your children than you do. Every moment of every day, your words and actions shape and mold your children. It is never a question of whether you

will exert this “parent power.” The only question is this: will your influence be positive or negative?

Realize that you don’t have this influence by accident. God designed it that way. The moment God made you parents, he placed this awesome power into your hands. How are you using it?

Let’s take a look at a biblical example of this principle of parent power at work.

Setting the scene

In order to understand these words from Exodus chapter 20, we must remember that God was speaking from Mount Sinai. This message thundered from God as the whole mountain was shaking and smoking.

Exodus 20:3-6 You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Understanding the point

In verse 5, God certainly is not talking about holding children accountable for sins they themselves have not committed. In Ezekiel chapter 18 and elsewhere in Scripture, God clearly tells us that he does not operate that way. Therefore, what must be true about the third and fourth generations of those who come from fathers who “hate” God?

Clearly the generations mentioned in verse 5 must be progressing in wickedness from generation to generation. Each generation has learned to hate God from the former, and both hatred and wickedness have increased. Consider this progression in Cain’s family, as recorded in Genesis chapter 4. Cain tried to hide his murder. He feared what might happen as others found out about his sin. Five generations later, Lamech had learned to *boast* about a murder he had committed (Genesis 4:23,24). Realize how subtly Satan works in all this. A sin that was only tolerated in one generation may be compromised in the next and, finally, may be embraced wholeheartedly by the third generation.

Taking it home

What is God saying about the importance of parenting roles to successive generations?

(Allow 10-15 seconds of silence so parents can think of their answers.)
God is showing us that the spiritual welfare not only of our own children but also of successive generations (as long as God permits the world to continue) is affected by our homes. God has actually placed several generations into our hands as we nurture our children in our homes.

Sometimes we get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of daily existence and making ends meet that we lose sight of our goal as parents. Picture your children and grandchildren talking about you after you are in heaven. They are thanking God for blessings given through you. What do you want them to say?

(Allow 10-15 seconds of silence so parents can think of their answers.)
We want our children to be thankful for a home in which their mother and father taught them to love God’s Word. We want them to be thankful for a home in which word and example taught them that faith in Jesus Christ and its fruits are what life is really all about. We want them to be thankful for a home in which taking it to the Lord in prayer is the answer to every need. (The lists will vary as parents consider the spiritual blessings they want their children and grandchildren to assimilate from their homes and spiritual influence.)

Part Two: God defines how to use parent power

God intends that parents use the parent power he has given them in two ways. First of all, God intends for parents to use their parent power to share the promise of salvation by speaking God's Word to their children. There's proof of the importance of sharing God's Word verbally.

Setting the scene

Psalm 78 is a powerful reminder that Christianity is never more than one generation old. God gives each generation the mission to pass on the knowledge of salvation to the next generation. When that task is neglected, the knowledge of the true God and his salvation may soon be lost.

Psalm 78:1-8 *O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
They would not be like their forefathers—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*

Understanding the point

What triple blessing results when parents do not “hide” these things from their children?

When human hearts are regularly exposed to the Spirit's power through the Word, three blessings are found. The people (1) trust in God, (2) remember God's grace and kindness, and (3) keep his commands. In other words, the believers live their faith day to day.

Look at the last verse. What is the sad result whenever the Holy Spirit is denied the opportunity to work his wonders in human hearts through the Word?

Clearly, where the human heart is not under the influence of the Spirit, there will be stubborn and rebellious generations, whose hearts are not loyal to God. Consider the example of what happened in Israel after Joshua died (Judges 2:1-11).

Taking it home

As children begin attending Sunday school and Lutheran elementary school, why might parents be tempted to reduce or stop their spiritual training at home?

Parents may reason that the Sunday school or Lutheran elementary school teacher is now responsible for training their children spiritually. They may even feel that teachers are the experts. They may also feel that there is a danger that their children will get “too much of a good thing.” Why should parents continue reading Bible stories at home when their children are also learning those stories at church or school?

Isn't it strange that we don't worry about getting “too much of a good thing” when it comes to sports? It seems that the only things we worry about getting too much of are saturated fats and the Word of God. The psalm writer wasn't worried about getting too much of the Word of God when he wrote about the blessings of the believer whose “delight is in the law [the Word] of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2).

Why do children need to hear God's Word from their parents and not just from pastors and teachers?

(Allow sufficient time for parents to formulate their answers.)

If children hear God's Word only in church and school, they may get the impression that the message of Christ is only “churchy, bookish” stuff that isn't what real life is all about. Children may conclude that all this “Jesus stuff” is really not that important to Mom and Dad and, therefore, not very important to them either. Also, consider the amount of time children spend with their pastor and teacher compared to the amount of time in the home. The opportunities parents have to expose their children to the Word in real-life situations go far beyond the opportunities any teacher or pastor has with them.

Consider discussing the next question in small groups of four or five people. Ask the members of each group to appoint a discussion leader-secretary. This person is to keep them on task and record their conclusions so they can report back to the larger group.

If you consider the home, church, and Lutheran school (where available) to be a team, what role do you see each team member playing?

The home is the place where the knowledge of God's Word will be applied most often to the children's lives in order to nurture their faith. The church is to provide direct instruction to its youth (feeding both the lambs and the sheep), and the pastor is to watch over all the souls as the shepherd under Christ. The church, however, is also to equip and enable its members to carry out their service to Christ. Certainly, a part of that equipping is to train parents for the day-to-day spiritual nurture of their children. The Lutheran school offers Christian parents an invaluable tool to help their children grow in the knowledge of God's Word, which is always around them in the classroom. God did not intend one team member to replace the other.

Which team member will tend to have the greatest impact on the children?

When we consider the amount of time children are around their parents, the home would seem to have the greatest impact.

God intends that parents use their parent power a second way—to model trust in the Lord for their children. This parent power is always at work. Here again the only question is whether the model is positive or negative.

Here, please note that by *modeling*, we are not talking about putting on a show for the sake of our children. That is hypocrisy, and children will see through that. When we speak of modeling our faith, we simply mean that, as we live according to God's holy will in faith, we set a clear example for our children. Our actions can indeed speak louder than our words.

Setting the scene

We see both a positive and a negative example in the account of Abraham and his son, Isaac. First, the positive example:

Both Abraham and Isaac were aliens and strangers living in a foreign land. They realized they did not fit in with the unbelieving Canaanites around them. We need to understand how wicked the Canaanite society around Abraham and Isaac was. Four centuries later God commanded the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites completely when they conquered the land under Joshua's command. At the time of Joshua, male and female prostitution and the sacrifice of children as burnt offerings were just two of the religious practices of the Canaanite people.

Genesis 24:1-4 *Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac."*

Genesis 28:1,2 *So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother."*

Understanding the point

As he nurtured Isaac, Abraham modeled a spiritual concern which Isaac remembered and later copied as he dealt with his own son Jacob. What was that spiritual concern?

Abraham had taught Isaac the importance of having a spouse who shared the saving faith in the Lord.

This side note could be shared with the parents: How many of you pray for the future spouses of your children? Think what impact those spouses are going to have one day on their lives. Start praying now, even though you don't know the names of your future daughters- or sons-in-law.

Setting the scene

Now, the negative example:

Scripture doesn't hold fake saints before us. It shows us God's people with their "warts and all." The patriarchs of old were not perfect parents; they lived in daily need of a Savior every bit as much as we do. These verses from Genesis chapters 25 and 37 will give proof of that.

Genesis 25:27,28 *The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

Genesis 37:3 *Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.*

Understanding the point

What weakness in Isaac's life showed up in the life of his son Jacob?

The favoritism evident in the way Isaac dealt with his two sons was replayed one generation later. Jacob also played favorites as he dealt with his sons. Note the havoc this sin caused in both generations.

Taking it home

Why is the home *the* place for putting this power of Christian modeling to work?

The home could be called the laboratory of Christian faith. Our children come home from church and school to see if things really are as they were taught. It is in the home—in the day-to-day living of the Christian life—that children can see and experience what it means to put God's Word to work.

Here is a way to see parent power at work in your own family: List the beliefs and habits—both positive and negative—that you learned from your parents.

Positive:

Negative:

Now take a moment to list the beliefs and habits—both positive and negative—that you are passing on to your children.

Positive:

Negative:

As you look at your two sets of lists, consider this: What are the similarities between the two lists? Also, are the beliefs, attitudes, and values you are passing down to your children the ones you want to hand down as a legacy for the next three to four generations?

There will almost certainly be similarities between the two sets of lists. This is a visible example of parent power at work through three generations of families. Please assure parents that the Holy Spirit can change patterns in the lives of his believers. We are not bound to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Part Three: God promises the strength to carry out your responsibilities

Please understand the importance of Part Three of this first session. As we are reminded of the awesome responsibility God has given us, pains of conscience will awaken in all of us, for we have often failed. We cannot honestly say that we have shared God's Word with our children as often as possible. Also, we have not lived our lives as God desires.

However, remember that God's law (what God expects of us) does not have the power to change our lives. Only the gospel (God's forgiveness and his promise in Christ of strength for daily living) can enable us, parents, to find forgiveness for past sins and the confidence for future change.

Setting the scene

Joyful confidence in the Lord is the recurring theme of Paul's letter to his congregation in Philippi. That is stunning in light of the fact that our Lord inspired Paul to write this letter while he was a prisoner in

Rome. The next Bible passage tells of Paul's contentment and confidence in Christ. Paul was not sitting on a cruise ship when he wrote this letter in which he tells us not to worry. When he wrote, his very life was hanging in the balance.

Philippians 4:12,13 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Understanding the point

Though Paul faced the daily uncertainties of life as a prisoner in Rome, what gave him the confidence that he could meet the challenges each day would bring?

He was confident that the Lord would supply strength to meet the challenges of each day. The Lord had allowed him to be a prisoner in Rome; therefore, he was confident that the Lord would enable him to "do everything" that God had planned for him in Rome.

Taking it home

What is the "strength" Christ gives us, even as we consider the times when we failed to use God's gift of parent power?

As we consider our past failings, the belief that Christ has freely forgiven our failures results in spiritual strength to serve our Lord gladly. The most important time a Christian parent can spend is time going back to the cross of Calvary and there finding the comfort of Jesus' forgiving love.

What is the "strength" for the future that we receive from Christ to carry out our responsibilities as Christian parents?

As we look to the future, we rest assured that God never gives us any responsibility in life without giving us the strength to carry it out. God made us parents. God gave us parent power. Therefore, God in his grace enables us to carry out that responsibility. Additional passages to which we could point parents are Romans 6:14, Galatians 2:20, and Philippians 2:13.

HOMEwork



Set aside some quiet time this week to consider three strengths and three weaknesses of your family unit. If God has blessed you with a Christian spouse, plan some uninterrupted time together to talk this over.

- 1) Thank God for the Christian strengths you find in your household.
- 2) Honestly confess as sin whatever you find that is contrary to God's will. Return to the water of your baptism and drown those sins by daily repentance.
- 3) Remember that from the water of your baptism, you arose with the power of Christ. You have the power of Christ to help you live differently. The patterns of the past do not need to dominate the future. Begin to think and talk about what you can do, by the grace of God, to build on the strengths and to overcome the weaknesses.
- 4) Ask your children to list the things about your family for which they are thankful to God. Ask them also what they wish were different. Let them know that you want them to talk openly about this.

Each of the sessions directs parents to think about how they will put the concepts discussed in that session to work. This is an important part of the Bible study since it encourages the immediate use of what the parents have studied.

Remind the parents that honest self-evaluation can be painful, but they will find healing only in the grace of Christ.

Finally, highlight the next lesson for them.

Preview of the next session

What is the single most important thing a father and mother can do to help their home grow in Christ? We'll find out next time!

Closing devotion

At the close of each session you will find a suggested hymn and Scripture reading.

You may close with a prayer or, better yet, you may close with a devotion. One way for parents to learn how to lead a home devotion is to see one modeled for them. You can do this at the close of each session by using the Morning Devotion (page 152) or the Evening Devotion (page 153) in *Christian Worship*.

Suggested closing hymn: 506

Possible reading: Psalm 145:1-10

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Two

Wanted: Spiritual Parents to Raise Spiritual Children

Introduction

Display an empty pitcher and three or four empty cups. As you begin this little “parable,” assure the participants that though the parable may seem simplistic, a very important point will be made.

Act as if you are going to pour some water from the empty pitcher for several members of the group. Of course, since the pitcher is empty, nothing pours out into the glasses. Look a bit puzzled and wonder out loud why that is. Suggest that you may need a nicer pitcher or perhaps better glasses. Maybe you should have a silver serving tray. Then, admit what is obvious: an empty pitcher, no matter how nice, cannot fill empty glasses.

Parents are that pitcher, and the glasses are their children. People today are constantly trying to improve the outside of the pitchers and glasses with a nice house, nice clothes, nice car, successful job, and the like. But Christian parents know the key is what is poured from inside the parent into the heart of the child. All the rest will not matter in the end. Christian parents want Christ to be poured out from them into their children. The only way that can happen is if the pitcher is constantly refilled. An empty pitcher cannot fill any glasses.

What do children need most in a parent? They need a mom and a dad who are so full of Christ Jesus that they cannot help overflowing with and pouring out God’s Word to their children. That is what Session Two is about.

Leaders please note the following: At first parents may wonder what practical value this lesson has for their lives. We live in an age of self-help manuals, some of which may give ten quick and easy steps on how to become a better parent. This lesson does not follow that familiar format. What our children really need most is parents who are growing in Christ, not parents with better how-to lists. The best how-to lists in the world are useless in the spiritual realm without the spiritual strength and power of Christ at work in the hearts of moms and dads. This Bible study is built upon the conviction that building spiritually strong parents is the most important task in the Christian home. It may not be a quick fix; but, in the end, it is the single most important ingredient of a strong Christian home.

Part One: The best gift Christian parents can give to their children

Setting the scene

Imagine running a food distribution service for the poor widows in a congregation of more than ten thousand people! As the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem grew rapidly, certain needs also grew. It was difficult to care for both the spiritual and physical well-being of all the believers. The apostles needed help so that they could concentrate on prayer and the administration of the means of grace.

Acts 6:1-4 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Understanding the point

The apostles selected seven men to oversee the food distribution for the widows in the congregation. If you were to develop a job description from verse 1, what qualities would you look for first in the job applicants?

Humanly speaking, the job description would seem to require, first and foremost, someone who has great organizational skills and can keep accurate records.

However, according to verse 3, what is the chief quality that the Twelve were looking for in the men who were to be chosen?

The most important qualification the apostles gave for those who would fill this position was, "men . . . who are . . . full of the Spirit and wisdom."

Taking it home

The Jerusalem congregation considered it important that those entrusted with distributing food be "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Why is it even more important that those whom God entrusts with the gift of children be "full of the Spirit and wisdom" as well?

When God gives a couple the gift of children, he places eternal souls in their care. He commands parents to bring up their children in his nurture and admonition for the eternal welfare of their souls. That is far more important than the distribution of food.

How does one get full of the Spirit and wisdom? (Jesus' words from John 6:63 will help: "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.")

As Lutheran Christians, we are convinced that the Holy Spirit comes to us through the means of grace. He does not seep through the walls of our homes by some kind of spiritual osmosis. It is only by faithful and regular use of the Word, publicly and privately, that Christians can be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Realize that, while this point should be obvious to Lutheran Christians, in practice we all too often tend to tempt God, as if he could keep our faith strong in some other way.

Remember, prayer is not a means of grace. The direction of prayer is from us to God, not from God to us. We are urged in James chapter 1 to pray for wisdom, but it is through the Spirit's work through the Word that God fulfills the promise to give us wisdom.

Part Two: The importance of personal time in God’s Word for every Christian—especially a Christian parent

Let’s consider three reasons why personal study of the Word is important.

Reason 1

Setting the scene

Paul is one of the greatest champions of the gospel found on the pages of Scripture. He was an apostle, an inspired author of 13 books of the New Testament, and an extraordinary missionary. But here he gives us a glimpse into the spiritual struggles he had to fight daily, just as we also must.

Romans 7:21-25 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Understanding the point

What two opposing forces did Paul find to be at war within him?

Paul’s sinful nature and new self were waging a constant battle within him.

Where did Paul find victory in this war?

Paul could not find the victory by looking inside himself. There he found only evidence of too many defeats. Nor does Paul say that victory comes by resolving to work harder and better next time. Victory came from looking up to Christ and his victory for Paul. The believer may still feel daily battles and struggles, but the great truth is that the war has been won, and Jesus has declared all who believe in him to be the victors with him.

What is the final victory in this war?

The final victory in this war is to receive the “crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:8) in heaven, which Christ has won for us. That is the ultimate goal for every Christian; and for Christian parents that is also the ultimate goal for all those entrusted to their care in the home.

Taking it home

If we examine our spiritual condition as Paul did, we will confess that the same war rages within every one of us. The evidence can be seen when we lose patience with one another in our homes or when our words and actions reflect the world’s attitudes and values rather than our faith in Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit to lead us constantly to repentance and to take us back daily to the cross, where we find the victory won by our Savior.

If we are not daily in God’s Word, what happens in the struggle within us between the sinful nature and the new self?

If we are not regularly in the Word, the sinful nature grows stronger and stronger. The sinful nature’s goal is to regain full control of our hearts. Also, a person’s new self (reborn in Christ) grows weaker and weaker when it is cut off from its power supply—the power of God’s grace in Word and sacrament.

Please note: often Christians may feel different or even odd because they think they are the only ones wrestling with doubts and being assaulted with spiritual struggles within. We need to remind one another that our strength is not from ourselves but from Christ.

What happens in that struggle when we are regularly in touch with God's Word?

When we are daily in the Word, the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to "put off" the old self and to "put on" our new self (see Ephesians 4:20-24). The Word enables us to put off our old self when we recognize the sinful thoughts, words, and actions the old self has led us into and when we daily run to the cross of Christ for forgiveness. The Word also reminds us to put on our new self daily. Our Lord wants us to remember that we now wear the holiness of Christ and to remember that we have Christ's power to live a new life.

Complete this sentence: "My personal time in the Savior's Word is important for me because . . ."

Through daily repentance, forgiveness, and the power of the Spirit in my new life, I learn to enjoy the victory Christ has won for me.

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

If my sinful nature is getting the better of me, my own faith will falter, and I will also set a negative example for my children.

Agree or disagree: Being prepared for spiritual battle by studying the Word may be more important than ever because it is more difficult than ever to live as Christians in an unbelieving world.

Agree: Jesus warned that, as we draw closer and closer to his final coming, the world will grow more and more evil (Matthew chapter 24).

In fact, it will get so bad that Jesus even asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). The answer, by the grace of God, is "Yes!" However, just the fact that Jesus asks the question is a sobering reminder that there will be many who will fall from the faith.

Disagree: We must remember that the devil, the sinful world, and our sinful flesh have never made it "easy" to persevere in the Christian faith. Each generation faces its common and unique challenges.

Reason 2

Setting the scene

We all have had more than one of "those days," when everything seems to go wrong. Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, was having one when the Lord inspired him to write that psalm. The whole first half is a bitter complaint, which he poured out to the Lord. Asaph complained that God seems to treat the wicked better in this life than his own believers. Even as his heart cried out in the midst of his struggle, God sent Asaph the answer in the last part of the psalm.

Psalm 73:23-28 *Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

*Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.*

Understanding the point

What is the psalmist's comfort in the midst of his discouragement and trouble? (Look especially at the first four lines.)

The psalmist found comfort in the fact that the Lord never leaves him. Though his life was filled with troubles, the Lord had a firm hold on him. God was guiding him with his counsel. This was Asaph's comfort and help in discouragement.

Taking it home

When do we need the Lord to hold us by his right hand and to guide us with his counsel?

How often we find ourselves in similar situations in which our daily troubles discourage us. At those times we plead for the Lord to comfort and counsel us.

How does he do that for us?

Through his Word, the Lord takes us by the hand and counsels, directs, and comforts us in the midst of all the confusing twists of life. Every time we read our Bibles, our Lord is keeping an appointment to counsel us and to guide and direct us through times of uncertainty and difficulty.

Complete this sentence: "My personal time in the Savior's Word is also important for me because . . ."

My time in the Word is a personal counseling session conducted by the Holy Spirit as he directs and comforts me through the troubles of life. He is the only counselor available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

If I don't have God's comfort and guidance in difficult days, I will grow frustrated; and the direction I choose, based on my own wisdom or the world's wisdom, will certainly harm my family.

Evaluate this statement: Many Christians foolishly spend time struggling with personal and family problems because they have not sought out the counsel God has given in his Word.

Reasons for reacting positively to the statement: Think how often we struggle with guilt, even though the Word assures us that we are absolutely and completely forgiven for Jesus' sake. Think how often we fear the problems facing us, even though the Word assures us that no matter how difficult life seems, God is always with us. Think how many husband-wife or parent-child disagreements would go away if we only took to heart the encouragement to love one another as we have been loved in Christ. Think how easily we can grow confused about moral decisions in life (and reap the harvest of trouble as a result) even though God's Word speaks so clearly about his will for our lives.

Reasons for reacting negatively to the statement: We must remember that being in the Word does not come with a guarantee that individuals or families will have no outward problems. Our sinful natures will still bother us until heaven, and troubles and difficulties will always be part of life in a world marred by human sin. We are guilty of heartless judging if we determine that an individual or family struggling with problems must be spiritually weak. What God does promise is that, as we build our lives on his Word, we will be able to endure and grow through the worst storms of life. Isn't that the point of the parable Jesus told at the end of his Sermon on the Mount—of building

on rock or sand? Look at Matthew 7:24-27. The storms came to both those who built on the Word and those who forgot his Word. But only one house remained standing.

Reason 3

Setting the scene

Sheep are among the most defenseless animals. Sheep depend on the shepherd for almost everything. Having a good and caring shepherd means the difference between life and death. In John chapter 10, Jesus calls himself our Shepherd, and he calls us his sheep.

John 10:1-5 [Jesus said,] “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

Understanding the point

Why is it important that the sheep learn to recognize the voice of their shepherd?

In this section, be sure to keep the focus on the picture Jesus uses. We will apply it to ourselves in the next section.

If the sheep don’t recognize the voice of their shepherd, they may end up following a thief or a robber, who sees them only as lamb chops.

How do sheep learn to know his voice well?

The sheep learn to know the shepherd’s voice because they hear it daily.

Taking it home

Why is it important that we learn to recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd?

There are plenty of “thieves and robbers,” those who use false teachings to lead us away from Christ and to destroy our faith. Remember Jesus’ words about false prophets in Matthew chapter 7.

What are some of the voices Satan uses to try to confuse us (sheep of Christ) and to throw us off track?

There are plenty of ways Satan tries to confuse us. He might use a friend at work to give us unbelieving and misguided opinions; he uses talk show hosts on radio and TV; he can use other television programs; he also uses unbelieving counselors.

How do we learn to know our Shepherd’s voice so well that we will never follow a stranger?

We learn to know our Shepherd’s voice well the same way the sheep do—by hearing it daily. One hour a week of hearing his voice may leave us dangerously vulnerable. However, as we daily listen to his voice and as his promises more and more become a part of us, we will learn to follow him closely on the road home to heaven.

Complete this sentence: “My personal time in the Savior’s Word is also important for me because . . .”

It enables me to follow my Shepherd.

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

If I, an adult “sheep,” become confused and fall away from the truth of Christ, my little lambs will tend to follow. If I follow closely behind the Good Shepherd, I set a wonderful example for the lambs following me.

Part Three: Getting into the Word

Part Three offers this session’s best opportunity for separating into smaller groups. Here’s one way to proceed with this section:

Share the statistics on the percentage of Bible readers among Protestant Christians in the USA. Ask the discussion groups to consider why Christians very often neglect reading their Bibles. Again, have each group appoint a leader and secretary. Give them ten minutes to discuss the roadblocks that get in the way of their personal study of God’s Word. NOTE: We are not yet talking about sharing the Word with their children. That will come in Sessions Three and Four.

The Bible may be the most respected book in the world; many people speak highly of it. But, sad to say, the Bible may also be the most neglected book in the world. An October 2000 Gallup poll indicated that 63 percent of Americans read the Bible once a month or less.

What are the chief roadblocks that keep us from reading God’s Word more often?

Answers will vary, but parents may offer three main obstacles:

- 1) a lack of motivation because they often don’t see this as a high priority in life
- 2) a lack of time because of all the pressures of life
- 3) a lack of confidence that they will be able to understand what they are reading in Scripture

Encourage the groups to discuss solutions to the obstacles they have listed.

After you bring the groups back together, refer to the following passages as you discuss how to overcome the roadblocks they have identified. If the passages don’t seem to cover some of the roadblocks, be ready to work with the group to find other Bible passages.

How do these passages give us solutions to those roadblocks?

Mark 8:36 *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?*

Mark 8:36 reminds us that being in the Word for the sake of holding on to our eternal salvation deserves to be the number one priority in our lives. This speaks to the roadblocks that deal with not taking enough time to read the Bible, or to those that reflect the thought that the Bible is not important enough.

Luke 10:41,42 *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

In order for the class to understand Luke 10:41,42, you will need to give some background information. Don’t assume that parents know this Bible story. This passage also deals with busy lifestyles. Notice in particular that the things that kept Martha busy were good things, just not the best. This applies to much of what makes our schedules so busy.

Psalm 119:18 *Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.*

Psalm 119:18 speaks of a roadblock that fits into the category: “I read my Bible but don’t get anything out of it.” As we study the Word, God will open our eyes to see wonderful things. Take note that the word *law* in this passage is used not just for God’s commandments but for the entire Bible—his whole revelation. The word *law* is a synonym for the whole Word of God.

Luke 11:28 *Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and obey it.* (Perhaps a more literal translation for “obey it” would be “guard it”)

We often use Luke 11:28 as a command, but isn’t it really a promise? It is God’s promise that, as we hear and guard his Word, he will indeed bless us in his time and in his way. God can bless us through his Word even when we aren’t aware of what he is accomplishing through his Spirit. You may wish to refer to page 95 of the Guide for Christian Home Bible Readers for a quotation from Martin Luther on the working of the Word.

We don’t study the Bible just so our children can see us doing it. However, what important message are we sending them when they see us making daily use of the Word? Consider Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment: “We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.” Consider also these words which Jeremiah spoke about the Word of the Lord: “When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty” (Jeremiah 15:16).

When our children see us reading and studying the Word, they will be seeing living proof that Christians do not live by bread or work or sports or TV but by every Word that comes from the mouth of our heavenly Father. Such an example at home can have the impact of ten sermons. Our modeling shows how important our personal study of the Word is to us. As our children see us reading our Bibles, they are learning that study of the Word is not just something for kids in school but for all of us, throughout our lives. Nothing can more quickly destroy the “confirmation equals graduation” syndrome than for children to see Mom and Dad treasuring their Bibles.

How would you respond to a Christian friend who says this to you: “I worship regularly and often attend Bible classes at church. I don’t see why reading my Bible at home is so important.”

Isn’t there a distorted view of the Word of God behind this answer? The Word is being viewed as some bitter medicine, which a person would try to take as little of as possible. Why take more if you don’t “have to”?

How foolish to speak that way when we remember that the Word is our very life! May the Holy Spirit lead us to view God’s Word in the same way Jeremiah did: “When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty” (Jeremiah 15:16). Why resist the extra “meals” of that which delights our souls, in between the weekend family “feasts” we receive at church?

HOMEwork

(Notice that HOMEwork addresses both public worship and private study of the Word.)



Consider how to increase your contact with your Savior’s Word.

For public worship:

If you do not presently worship and attend Bible class/Sunday school together as a family every Sunday, consider making this commitment: attend worship and Bible class/Sunday school for the next seven Sundays, unless God makes it impossible.

When a family worships every Sunday, it can save a lot of arguing. Everyone in the house will know that come Sunday morning the family will be found in worship. It removes a lot of debate and discussion about what deserves to get in the way of worship: up late, out late, worked hard this week, company is coming, and other foolish excuses.

For personal study:

1) Consider what can be removed from your schedule to make time for personal study of the Word. Strive to use the same time each day. Remember, it is really a matter of subtracting what is of lesser importance from our busy schedules, not of adding more to what may be an already overloaded schedule.

2) Plan how you will begin your study:

a) If you have never studied the Bible on your own before, perhaps begin by using a study guide such as a commentary from The People's Bible series from Northwestern Publishing House.

b) If you have a long commute to work, consider purchasing the Bible on tape and listening to it in your car.

c) Check out the Guide for Christian Home Bible Readers that is part of this Bible study. It will give you further helps and ideas for your personal study of the Word.

You might consider displaying samples of materials that can be used for personal study of the Word. It would be a good idea to have multiple copies of some of the best resources available so that class members can take those tools home and begin to use them immediately. "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

3) Inform a member of your family or your church family of your Bible reading plans, and ask them to encourage you regularly, perhaps even by reading the same section of Scripture that you are reading.

Stress the importance of heeding the encouragement this session gives—to grow in personal study and Bible reading. Point parents to Part Five in the Guide for Christian Home Bible Readers for further assistance in planning and carrying out home Bible reading. Consider encouraging the class to organize a personal Bible study workshop as a fitting follow-up to this study.

Preview of the next session

In many homes the Word is not being shared by families as often as they would like it to be. What gets in the way? How can families overcome those obstacles? Next time we will consider those obstacles and the power of God's grace to overcome them.

As you preview the next session, recognize that there is a shift in emphasis. To this point, we have looked at what parents need to help them carry out their responsibility. Now we shift our focus to consider how parents can go about carrying out that responsibility. (We now shift focus from "filling the pitcher" with Christ to "filling the glasses," that is, the children.)

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 283 or 284

Possible reading: Psalm 1

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Three

Overcome the Obstacles to Sharing the Promise with Your Children

Introduction

The phone rings at your house. It is Aunt Matilda and Uncle Herbert inviting you over next Saturday to see the slides from their trip to the yarn museum. What ideas quickly flood into your head?

The phone rings again. It is your friend Dave, he just received four tickets for front row seats at the (Packers, Bears, Raiders—fill in the local team or sport of your choice) game next Monday night. Even though you already have two other commitments and some things to do around the house, what immediately comes to mind?

What makes the difference in your reaction in the two scenarios?

After allowing time for answers, introduce the following thoughts:

We have an eternally important task to accomplish. We are striving to pass on the true Word clearly and powerfully to our children. But there are obstacles. How are we going to deal with those obstacles? Will we use them as convenient excuses, or will we find the power of God to overcome them? It is the latter that this session is about.

Following the introduction, this session could easily continue with small groups. You might ask them to discuss the obstacles that keep them from sharing the gospel promise with their children at home. It seems easier to have open and honest discussion about this in a small group setting.

Again, you can follow the pattern for group discussion that was set in Sessions One and Two. Allow ten minutes for this discussion.

At the close of the last session, we considered the obstacles that hinder us in our personal study of God's Word. Now let's list what we consider to be the greatest obstacles that hinder parents from sharing the Word of Christ more frequently with their children.

Part One: The greatest obstacle remover of them all

The following is a key concept in this session: Whatever we are convinced is important and valuable is what gets done. (Think of the introduction to the session.) The most powerful obstacle remover is to

consider the great things God accomplishes in our hearts and lives as we share the gospel promise with one another in our homes.

Let's consider four blessings that God gives Christian families as they share his Word together.

Setting the scene

Paul wrote 2 Timothy shortly before he was executed in Rome. He sent this letter to Timothy, his closest coworker in the ministry. Timothy's life gives us a vivid example of what God can accomplish when his Word is shared in the home.

Single Christian parents take note: Timothy's father apparently was a gentile unbeliever (Acts 16:1). Here is also proof of the great things God can accomplish through the faithful witness of one believing parent.

2 Timothy 1:5 I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

2 Timothy 3:15 From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Understanding the point

Timothy was blessed to live in a home in which the Word was shared with him already "from infancy." What blessings did Timothy gain through the Word of God shared by his mother and grandmother?

Timothy was blessed with a sincere (literally "nonhypocritical") faith that made him wise for salvation.

Taking it home

When your home resembles Timothy's, what is the most important blessing your children will gain as you share the Word with them?

The first and most important blessing of the Word in our lives is always the eternal one. God is seeking to strengthen our faith to keep us and our children wise for salvation.

Setting the scene

Every professional sport (and many other professions) has its "hall of fame." Chapter 11 of Hebrews is the Christian's "hall of faith." To inspire and encourage us, the author of Hebrews shares with us the life and example of believers who have gone home to heaven before us. Then in chapter 12, he applies the examples of their lives to ours.

Hebrews 11:13-16 All these people [Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob] were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy

set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Understanding the point

Look at verse 13 of Hebrews chapter 11. What did these patriarchs call themselves as they lived out their lives on earth?

They confessed that they were “aliens and strangers on earth.”

What did they mean by that?

Verses 14 and 16 point out that these patriarchs were looking forward to a “better country.” They were living with their eyes focused on their eternal home of heaven. They lived with the same conviction that the apostle Paul did when he wrote Philippians 3:20, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Taking it home

What sometimes makes it hard to remember that we too are “aliens and strangers on earth”?

We live in a materialistic society that considers things important only if they can be counted, tasted, touched, and polished. We get caught up in the rat race of “making a living” or just “getting by” from one day to the next.

As you share the Word in your home, how does the Holy Spirit help to readjust the focus of your lives? (Look at Hebrews 12:1-3.)

Through the Word, the Holy Spirit fixes our eyes on Jesus and things eternal. Again and again the Word lifts our eyes to our true status as children of God and heirs of eternal life. By doing that, the Word empowers us “to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Also, consider how this helps when our way of life clashes with the world. Since we are “aliens and strangers,” we will learn to expect that the world’s way of living and ours will be different. Consider, for instance, how you can tell that someone is a visitor from a foreign country. They dress differently, they talk differently, and they have different habits and customs. Those differences are noticeable also between the unbelieving world and the Christian family.

What, then, is a second blessing your family receives when you are in the Word together at home?

The second blessing of the Word in our homes is this: we are regularly reminded that we are citizens of heaven and that “here we do not have an enduring city” (Hebrews 13:14).

Setting the scene

In the last three chapters of Ephesians, the apostle Paul applies faith to daily living. The following section of chapter 4 speaks of our daily struggle to “take off” the old self, with which we were born, and to “put on” the new self, which has become ours through Baptism.

***Ephesians 4:31,32** Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Understanding the Point

What Paul lists in verse 31 are the products of an unforgiving heart. What Paul lists in the first part of verse 32 are the products of a forgiving heart. What is the key to changing an unforgiving heart into a forgiving heart?

As Lutheran Christians, we know we can't look to ourselves or our own resources to overcome sin in our lives. It is the forgiving love of God that is the power source to change hearts. Hearts that are daily touched by the forgiving love of Christ are empowered to forgive others in return. By that power, which is ours through the Word in the water of Baptism, we are strengthened to "get rid of all bitterness."

Taking it home

What are some everyday examples from your family life which reveal that you are still troubled by the unwholesome elements Paul lists in verse 31?

There is no shortage of examples in families of the sins Paul lists in verse 31: quarrels among siblings, disagreements between spouses, loss of patience with one another, bitter words between parents and children.

How does regularly sharing the message of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ rid your home of "bitterness, rage and anger"?

As God's Word reminds us how much we need his forgiveness, it produces humble thankfulness within us, rather than proud self-centeredness. Solomon reminds us in Proverbs 13:10 that "Pride only breeds quarrels." However, as the spirit of divine forgiveness fills our hearts, it enables us to truly forgive one another.

What, then, is a third blessing your family enjoys when the Word is heard regularly within your home?

The third blessing, when the Word is shared in our homes, is a growing spirit of true heartfelt forgiveness that the Word works in our hearts.

Setting the scene

The apostle Paul often begins his letters with a section of praise and thanksgiving to God for working faith and love in the hearts and lives of his believers. Second Corinthians has an extensive praise and thanksgiving section.

2 Corinthians 1:3,4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Understanding the point

What wonderful "chain reaction" of comfort does Paul describe in these verses?

All real comfort and compassion in this world starts with our heavenly Father. He brings it to us and gives us comfort and compassion in our troubles. Then we, in turn, can reach out to others with that same comfort and compassion. So it goes, on and on.

Taking it home

As you share the comfort and compassion of Christ more and more within your family circle, what skill are you teaching them?

As we share God's comfort and compassion with our children, we teach them how to share that comfort and compassion with others.

We often complain that we Lutherans are poor at speaking about our faith to others. Why is the home such a good practice ground for sharing your faith with others?

Our homes are a nonthreatening practice ground for learning to talk about spiritual matters. Through the years, as our children grow comfortable discussing spiritual matters with us, they gain experience for sharing their faith with others outside the home. The Holy Spirit uses families that talk about the Savior to produce children who have learned to speak of him.

What, then, is the fourth blessing of the Spirit found in homes that share the gospel promise?

The fourth blessing of sharing the Word in our homes is that we become better equipped for sharing the Word outside our homes.

We have only scratched the surface in listing what the Christian family can gain when it gathers around the gospel promises of God in the home. What other blessings can the Spirit work as you read and study the Word as a family?

Other blessings might include a shared sense of purpose as a Christian family and a growing connection between what happens at church and school and in our everyday lives.

Agree or disagree: Emphasizing the blessings of sharing God's Word with my family leads to unrealistic expectations of what that Word will do for my family.

Agree: Again, we must be careful that we don't leave the impression that wherever the Word of God is found there is nothing but outward peace and joy. That is heaven. The trouble, of course, is not with the Word but with us and our world. We remain sinners who will stumble into temptation. This will cause strife and disharmony in our homes. Also, because we are still surrounded by a sinful world and perfection has not been promised until heaven, we are not going to be immune to life's troubles. In fact, God uses those very troubles to guide us back to the promises of his Word, so that our hope is more and more in him and not in the people and things of this life that will fail us all one day.

Disagree: The promises the Word makes will not let us down. The Word of God is alive and active. It is the power of the Holy Spirit at work. What it promises, it will most definitely fulfill. As the psalm writer states, "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 119:89,90). We can depend on every promise the Word makes to us. The Word is a life changing force at work in our homes to the glory of God and to the benefit of those who belong to him. We are never wrong for emphasizing the promises God makes. In fact, our problem is that we don't remember and rejoice in those promises more often.

Part Two: Make time to share the promise with your children

Now we will address the matter of time for the Word. We live in a world of hectic schedules. At times even church and school play a part in making matters worse. This section seeks to help the Christian family understand that there will always be more things to do than there is time to do them. It all boils down to prioritizing our time for those things that are most important to us. It comes down to setting the priorities for our lives, instead of letting the unbelieving world and the pressures of life set them for us.

Setting the scene

When God completed his work of creation in six 24-hour days, it was time for a report card on his creative work. God received a straight A. The work was perfect.

Genesis 1:5,8,13,19,23,31 *There was evening, and there was morning—the first day.
There was evening, and there was morning—the second day.
There was evening, and there was morning—the third day.
There was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.
There was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.
God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

Understanding the point

What part of everyday life was included in the summary that everything was “very good”? (Hint: God began this on the first day of creation, and it has been a fact of life every day since.)

Included in God’s “very good” was his creation of time in 24-hour days and seven-day weeks.

Taking it home

God urges us to take time for his Word. There are 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. That is part of God’s good plan. What are we saying if we claim to have no time?

We have failed to prioritize our time as God wants. There is always time each day to accomplish what God wants us to accomplish. The answer for our lives is not a 30-hour day or an eight-day week. The answer is to put at the top of our list what is at the top of God’s list for us.

What are some of the biggest time robbers in our homes and lives? Remember, we’re not only looking for bad things; some of the worst time robbers may be good things that have gained a priority in our lives that they do not deserve.

The primary time robber is the TV (watching every sporting event televised by ESPN, ESPN2, ECS and MSC). But there are other time robbers as well. Another might be the many meaningful activities that keep the family constantly rushing around from practice to practice, tournament to tournament.

Once again, the purpose of the HOMEwork section is to extend the learning into the home for the week. Urge parents to give serious consideration to making changes in their family’s use of time so that they are able to spend time together in the Word.

Also, reassure the parents that you are not another voice telling them to add something to an already overloaded schedule. It is not a matter of adding but of subtracting.

Evaluate this statement: Every time Christians use lack of time as a reason for not sharing the Word with their families, the excuse is really nothing more than apathy masquerading as busy-ness.

Reasons to evaluate that statement negatively: We need to be careful about judging others harshly. Repentance begins in the individual’s home first. There may indeed be some cases in which someone has overcommitted to obligations at work, at church, or in the community. People may not realize how much they have let others set the agenda for their lives. They may be very troubled by the lack of sharing the Word. Some have never learned the truth that every time we say yes to something, we are at the same time saying no to something else.

Reasons to evaluate that statement positively: Why is it that NFL football fans suddenly find this three-hour gap of free time on Sunday afternoon? We tend to make time for what is truly important to us. If the Word were truly as important to us as we often claim that it is, it would get the first and best of our personal and family time.

HOMEwork



- 1) Consider: Of the obstacles we discussed in this lesson, what is the primary obstacle that gets in the way of sharing the promise with your children? Pray for God's help and strength to knock that obstacle down. Then, armed with the promise of his help, make plans to do just that.
- 2) Consider also: To what in your schedule must you say no if you are going to have time for sharing the gospel promises with your children? If you have trouble saying no, remember, you are always saying no to some things in your schedule. Since your "plate" can only hold so much, every time you say yes to one thing, something else gets shoved off your plate. We are not talking about adding to our schedules when we speak of sharing the gospel promises with our families. We are talking about subtracting.

The question really is, Who sets the priorities for your life? the Lord? or the unbelieving world? If we do not prayerfully and carefully set the priorities for our lives, by default, the unbelieving world will squeeze its priorities into our lives.

Before next week, consider what you will subtract from your schedule to allow time to regularly share the gospel promises in your family.

Preview of the next session

"All right! All right! You've convinced me!" you say. "I'll share the Word with my children! But how do I do it?"

Next time, we'll offer some practical suggestions for how to make the most of every opportunity to share the gospel promises with your children.

| Let the parents know that the next session will talk about the practical details of how to lead family devotions.

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 504

Possible reading: Ephesians 6:1-4

| For closing, you can once again make use of the Morning or Evening Devotion from *Christian Worship*.

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Four

Make the Most of Every Opportunity

Introduction

(The following introduction is adapted from the book *Point Man: How a Man Can Lead a Family*, by Steve Farrar, Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1990.)

Imagine that you are an infantryman in Vietnam. It is your turn to go out with several soldiers from your unit. But there is something about this patrol that makes your heart race. You are the “point man.” You will be leading the way through territory in which you know the enemy has been spotted. You will have to see everything and you will have to anticipate every danger—booby traps, snipers, ambushes. If you fail to see the dangers ahead, all those following behind you may pay with their lives for your mistakes.

Sound far-fetched? Not really. You are in a war every day. As a father or mother, you are God’s point man. God has seen fit to give you the spiritual leadership of your family. Leading your family through the chaos of American culture is like leading a patrol through enemy-occupied territory. And the casualties are as real as those whose names are etched on the Vietnam War Memorial.

As Christian parents in 21st-century America, you have a special challenge to guide and lead your children in an increasingly godless society. And what may be more scary is that you only have so many years in which to lead them. Faster than you may realize, they are going to be on their own, and someday your grandchildren will be following them, as they once followed you.

How important that makes the years you have been given for leading your children. You are preparing them to fight this battle without you. Are your children prepared for the spiritual battle Satan is waging against Christ’s church and all who call him Lord and Savior? They can only survive in this battle if they are clothed with the full armor of God which Paul describes in Ephesians 6.

Every time you share the Word with your children, the Spirit uses you as his tools to clothe your children with the spiritual armor they need for battle. In this fourth session, let’s consider how to make the most of every opportunity God gives you to clothe your children with the full armor of God.

When we speak of parents sharing the promise with their children in the home, we may think first of family devotions. By *devotions* we mean a specific time set aside to read and discuss a portion of Scripture or a meditation from a devotion book or magazine, such as *Lutheran Parent’s Wellspring*. Such *formal* sharing of the gospel promise is one way to impress on the next generation the importance of God’s Word, but it isn’t the only way. Equally important, if not even more important, is the *informal* sharing of the Word that takes place as situations and opportunities arise

throughout the day and week. In this fourth session, we will look at ways to put together a formal family worship time. We will also discuss ways to recognize and seize the informal opportunities.

Part One: Formal family worship

The following are basic outward components of home worship:

- 1) Scripture reading (from the Bible or a devotion book)
- 2) Discussion (of what was read, involving the entire family)

Emphasize that discussion is vitally important for formal home devotions. Discussion allows children to participate actively in home worship, instead of sitting passively as spectators. Discussion also helps children put into their own words the truths that were shared. Such active give and take is vital in order to remember what was shared. Also, as we listen to our children, we will be able to see whether they have understood the Word that was shared.

- 3) Prayer

- 4) Music

Music is a powerful way to share the truth of God, especially with small children. Consider how music filled the home of Martin Luther. His familiar Christmas hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" was not originally written for church use. The well-known hymn was written for his family to celebrate the Savior's birth at home. Using music in family worship may be easier for families whose members have musical gifts. Families with lesser musical gifts may find recorded music useful. Certainly each family is free to structure its formal home worship as its members choose.

Be sure to emphasize that the hymnal can be far more than a public worship tool. It has a rich treasury of prayers, songs, and orders of worship for the family as well.

The following components can add reverence and variety to home worship:

- 1) On occasion, begin with an invocation ("In the name of the Father . . .").
- 2) Close with a benediction (Aaronic: "The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face shine on us and be gracious to us. The Lord look on us with favor and give us peace." or Apostolic: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.").
- 3) Make use of the psalms, either spoken in unison or sung using *Christian Worship*. It may be a wise investment for formal home worship to purchase a hymnal for each family member.
- 4) On occasion use one of the devotion formats in the front of *Christian Worship* (pages 150-153). Allow children to be worship leaders from time to time. (What are the benefits of doing that?)
- 5) Use the personal prayers found in *Christian Worship* on pages 134-139 (Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers are included here).
- 6) Other ideas?

The following are some age-specific ideas for sharing the promise with your children.

- 1) Ideas for infants to two-year-olds:
 - a) Show pictures of Jesus (always try to use similar pictures of Jesus).

- b) Begin teaching simple songs of faith (Strong Roots for Tender Shoots, early childhood materials from Northwestern Publishing House, offers several scripturally sound selections).
- c) Purchase some CDs or cassettes of scripturally sound music to play at home or when traveling in the car.

As you encourage parents to purchase doctrinally sound Christian music cassettes or CDs, remind them that much popular Christian music comes from sources that emphasize stirring up emotions, instead of emphasizing the truths of the gospel.

- d) Speak simple bedtime prayers for your children until they can begin to speak them with you.
- e) Find the simplest and most colorful Bible story books.
- f) Whatever you do: repeat, repeat, repeat.
- g) Other ideas?

Wouldn't it be great if, along with "Mama" and "Dada," your little ones would learn to lisp "Jesus" as one of their first words!

2) Ideas for preschoolers:

- a) Provide more advanced Bible story books with plenty of pictures and not too many words to the page.
- b) Continue teaching simple songs of faith (and adding new ones).
- c) Play CDs or cassettes that appeal to this age.

Again, doctrinally sound Christian music cassettes and CDs can help set a Christian atmosphere around the home. The same caution about popular Christian music applies.

- d) Help children learn to pray from the heart as they speak their own prayers

Be sure to let parents know that the best way to teach *ex corde* prayers (prayers from the heart) is to model such prayers for the children. Assure the parents that they are not "different" if at first they feel awkward when speaking *ex corde* prayers with their children. Also, remind them to be patient with the children, as they work through some awkward times.

- e) Other ideas?

3) Ideas for elementary school children:

- a) Use more advanced Bible story books and other devotional tools.
- b) Continue helping the children learn to speak prayers in their own words.
- c) From time to time, have the children tell their favorite Bible stories, and have them explain why they are favorites.
- d) Play CDs or cassettes of scripturally sound music at home or when traveling in the car.
- e) Make use of the stories and projects designed for home use in the Christ-Light religion curriculum. This curriculum may be the one used in your Lutheran elementary school and/or Sunday school.

- f) Purchase devotion books, both for yourself as parents and for your family. Devotions focused on parenting provide biblical insight and encouragement for the task of raising children who are grounded in Jesus.

Family devotions will help parents and children grow in the knowledge of what Christ's life and death means for us all.

Have some sample copies available, along with ordering information. Strike while the iron is hot.

Many devotion books are available for use with grade school children.

Purchase devotional books that are faithful to the Scriptures and age appropriate for your children.

While the use of picturesque illustrations and stories from everyday life are needed to bring abstract truths down to the children's concrete level of understanding, be sure that the substance (the message from God's Word) is not overshadowed by the style.

Be sure to warn the parents to preview all devotional materials carefully. Many books are more "fluff" than "stuff." Each devotion should communicate truth from the Word, not just entertain our children.

Also, much devotional material (even some put out by Lutheran publishers) is little more than moralizing. To moralize is to forget that the law has no power in and of itself to enable us to do right. The idea that we might get into trouble and wreck things is not the Christian's reason for keeping God's commands. (Example: God wants us to be honest. Besides, look at all the trouble dishonesty can cause. So, let's be truthful.) We must remember that our task as Christian parents is far more than teaching our children to know right from wrong. They can know all of that and still go to hell because the law cannot save.

The law is designed to lead us to repentance and to give us direction for our Christian lives. Only the saving love of Jesus Christ forgives us and sends us out with the power of the Holy Spirit to run in the path of God's commands.

Be sure that a book is clear on the basics of law and gospel. Ask these questions as you preview the devotions:

- 1) Does the author call us regularly to repentance and lead us constantly to the cross of Christ for forgiveness?
- 2) Do the devotions use God's commandments as a guide for Christian life, and do they remind us that only Christ's saving love for us gives us the motivation and power to follow that guidance?

Contact Northwestern Publishing House for other suggestions of doctrinally sound devotion books suitable for your family. Visit www.nph.net or call 1-800-662-6022 or 1-800-662-6093.

g) Other ideas?

4) Ideas for junior and senior high school teens:

- a) Perhaps this is a good time to reduce the use of other tools and begin to read selected portions of the Bible. Be sure to plan your readings and questions for discussion. One idea is to consult The People's Bible commentary series and study guides that are available.
- b) *Meditations* could also be used together with discussion questions planned ahead of time. Teens could take turns reading the devotion for the day.

- c) From time to time, ask your teen to plan the devotion for an evening. He or she can select a portion of Scripture to read, as well as prepare discussion questions and a prayer.
- d) Make use of the Christ-Light religion curriculum resources for the home. These are coordinated with materials being taught at area Lutheran high schools (and perhaps also in your church's teen Bible study.)

If your church and/or school is using the Christ-Light religion curriculum, bring some sample parent materials along to class, and take some time to show parents how the materials could be used at home.

- e) Play Christian music that appeals to this age group.

Caution: Be aware of the difference between music that is more Lutheran in character and that which is more Reformed in character. Reformed music, which dominates the market, tends to have the spirit of a tent revival, which uses emotionally charged music to get people on their feet and up to the altar to make their "decision for Christ." Lutheran music emphasizes the objective truths of what God has done for us and trusts the beauty of the gospel to stir genuine emotions. Reformed music tends to place primary emphasis on what we are to do for God (law). Lutheran music places primary stress on what God has done for us (gospel). While there is nothing wrong with music that speaks of our subjective response to the gospel, look for music that has a primary goal of proclaiming the wonderful works of God through music. (Simple hint: Pay attention to how many times *I*, *me*, and *my* appear in the lyrics. If first person pronouns predominate, the music is most likely highly subjective in nature.)

- f) Other ideas?

After sharing all the age-specific ideas with the parents, this would be an excellent time to have a family from the congregation demonstrate a family devotion for the group. (It may be better *not* to ask a called worker. Otherwise the people may think, "Well, of course, they know how to do it. What about us?") Perhaps you could videotape a family from the congregation doing a devotion. If they are willing, allow the mother and father to present what they have done to keep devotions going in their family.

This is a logical place for small group discussions. Give them 5-10 minutes to discuss how to overcome objections and problems that get in the way of formal family worship.

As in the past sessions, be sure to appoint a leader and secretary for each group so that they stay on task and are prepared to report back to the whole group.

Here is a different option for reporting back. Instead of having the whole group return to one place, remix the groups so that they have one person from each of the first groups in new small groups. Each person then shares the findings of the first discussion group with this new small group. This promotes continued participation, as the groups discuss the thoughts of the original groups. A simple way to arrange this is to give everyone a lettered number, such as A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, B3. During the first half of the discussion, group the members by letter. During the second half, group by number. (You could call the first grouping discussion groups and the second, expert groups, as each parent shares the expertise gained from the first grouping.) If you use this option, be sure to encourage each person to take notes during the first small group discussions.

How would you respond to the following common objections to family devotions?

1) I'm not a pastor or teacher, so I'm not comfortable sharing the Word with my family.

God has made you a parent and through his Word will equip you to be the spiritual leader of your home.

2) We tried it before, and it didn't work.

Try again! Those who stumble and fall in a race are only certain of defeat if they continue to lie facedown in the dirt. Ask what stopped you the last time, and make some changes. Perhaps finding better material will help.

3) We already go to church and Sunday school or Bible class together, and/or the kids are in our Lutheran elementary school. We don't want to overdo it.

How many people have we ever met who spent too much time in their Bibles? Yes, it is vitally important for our faith to gather regularly with our fellow Christians to worship and study the Word. However, our homes are still key places to share the gospel promises. Sharing the Word regularly at home powerfully proclaims to our children that God's Word is our life—not just a pleasant diversion for an hour or so each week.

4) We can't find a time when all of us are together on a regular basis.

Find a time for as many as possible as often as possible. Try to gather the whole family together at least once each week.

Points to remember:

1) Daily use of God's Word and prayer are a vital part of living as a Christian.

2) Find and use the best time available, even if that means you start only once or twice a week at first—but start somewhere.

3) Begin in God's name, using a suitable pattern and simple material.

4) Be regular, especially at first.

5) Start with part of the family if the whole family is not convinced.

6) Make it a happy experience; don't force it in a legalistic way. ("You are supposed to love the Word, so love it!")

7) Plan well, and then pray, pray, and pray for God's blessings on your efforts.

8) Trust that God will bless your efforts as he has promised.

"We will never find the perfect solution to our tendency to let worship slide. We will never find material that will always lead us into joyful willing worship. We will never find a time that will always be right for each person in the home. We will never be able to make family worship so vital that it will displace all other activities and priorities.

"But we do not stop trying. We continue because we are God's forgiven people, because we share the message of forgiveness and salvation, because we are given the power by the Holy Spirit to grow in our relationship to God and to one another by the Word. We never stop dedicating ourselves to the privilege of worship and, forgiven and renewed, rededicating the time to worship when we fail" (Ron Schlegel, *Family Worship*, Concordia, 1981, p. 26).

Part Two: Informal worship

By informal worship we are talking about unplanned sharing of the Word during the activities of daily life. Informal worship uses everyday events as opportunities to turn our children's attention to God and his Word.

Let's look at Moses' picture of what such informal worship might look like.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

These words are often used to emphasize the importance of formal family worship, and such an application is justified. But more specifically, these words encourage parents to seize all the informal opportunities.

What are some of the informal, everyday opportunities which Moses urges parents to seize so that they share the Word with their children?

Moses speaks of teaching God's Word early in the morning and at bedtime. He speaks of teaching while at home and while traveling as a family.

Also, please note: The real point of tying God's Word "as symbols on your hands" and binding "them on your foreheads" was to say, "Let the Word of God guide you in all you do (hands) and in all you think (foreheads)." The real reason to "write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" can be found in the words of Joshua: "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

It was not wrong for the Jews to tie portions of the Scriptures to their bodies and build them into the doorframes of their houses, but unfortunately, they often missed the real point.

Some have called these opportunities "teachable moments" in the lives of our children. What are some other examples of such teachable moments in the life of a Christian family?

Almost every moment around the house is a teachable moment. (That's what the following quotation is trying to get across by reminding us that children don't have any "knobs [to] turn off their little minds.")

Discuss the momentous truth expressed in this quotation from a Christian author: "Sometimes we adults associate learning [only] with books and Bibles and structured devotions. But when the books are closed and the lessons are over, children go on learning. No knobs turn off their little minds." (Gloria Gaither, "Capturing Those Teachable Moments," *Moody Monthly*, September 1978, pp. 90-93.)

Here's a little more of the quotation: "When I am less than the efficient, organized, calm, creative, well-groomed mother I want to be, I wish there were switches on our children's minds. But the children go on learning, watching me, seeing how I handle problems, sensing my unguarded reactions, picking up the 'vibes' of our home.

"I become painfully aware of my failures when I see some shabby action or attitude mirrored in my child. I, too, am learning. God is teaching me that *all* moments are teachable moments. The place to start buying up those moments is with myself." (The author then continues with an encouragement to personal Bible study as a parent.)

Here are some thoughts to help us make the most of informal opportunities:

- 1) Listen carefully to your children's questions because they can be special moments of opportunity.
 - | Consider how easy it is to grow impatient with all those questions. But that is when our children's minds and hearts are wide open.
- 2) Informal opportunities happen most often when you spend a good deal of time with your children. Also, be aware that quality time has a way of showing up only in the midst of a larger quantity of time. When asked how they spell *love*, children respond t-i-m-e.
 - | Without trying to lay guilt on families truly struggling to make ends meet, remind parents to step back and ask whether they are sacrificing their children on the altar of success. No one's tombstone will ever say, "I wish I had spent more time at the office."
- 3) Days of success and outward blessings in the lives of your children and family give you special opportunities to point them to the Lord as the source of every blessing.
 - | When the world pats a person on the back, we Christians, rather, give glory to our Lord and point the person to God. Positive reinforcement is important. But we are not trying to build a new generation of proud Pharisees; we want to raise up thankful Christians. Take note of how the apostle Paul expressed thanks regarding his fellow Christians. The beginning of his letters are filled with statements that begin like this: "I thank God for you that . . ." If you would like to see more examples, consider these references: Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:3; Philemon 4. This way of speaking praise to God gives him the credit for what he is accomplishing in our lives and our children's lives. When we express thanks in this way, we are acknowledging to our children that we are thankful to God for what happens in their lives. In this way, praise does not puff up but builds up, as it reminds us that it is God, not our own efforts, that is at work in our lives.
- 4) Days of difficulty and hardship provide some of the most important informal opportunities to show your children that you trust "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).
 - | We remember that we live under the cross; difficulty is not an abnormal intrusion into the life of the believer. Until heaven, it is the stuff of a life lived by faith.
- 5) Don't be afraid to admit to your children instances when you have been wrong (especially if you have wronged them). Such confession of sin is not weakness on the part of Christian parents. Rather, through such confession you show your children that you too live only by daily repentance and forgiveness. You are "sinner/saints," as they are.
 - | It's great to be our kids' heroes, who can do no wrong. It's better to be their role models, showing what it means to live in daily repentance and in the joy of forgiveness.
- 6) Make the most of the partnership with your church and school.
 - a) Talk about the worship service on the way home from church. You might discuss these things: the main thought in the sermon and the applications to your lives, the meaning of the hymns and psalms, the content of the prayers (including special prayers), the special meaning of the Lord's Supper (for a communion service).
 - b) Ask your children about the Sunday school lesson or youth Bible study discussion. You might ask these questions: Who were the main people in the lesson? What happened? What did the Lord do? How do the Bible truths apply to our lives?

- c) If your children attend a Lutheran elementary school, ask about the Bible history or religion lesson taught in school that day. You could use the same questions as in b) above. By doing so, you remind your children that the Word is important beyond the walls of the classroom and after we step out of the church doors.
- d) List other ways to make the most of your home/school/church partnership.

Allow parents to be brutally honest without breaking the Fourth and Eighth Commandments.

What other important reminders can help in the informal sharing of the promise?

HOMEwork



What is your plan for formal family devotions?

It will be beneficial if parents do some planning during the Bible study session. By doing that, they can share ideas with one another and encourage one another. If you have a book fair, they can look at the materials while they are planning.

Take five minutes now and write out a brief plan for formal devotions in your home. Be sure to consider the following:

- a) How will you deal with opposition to your devotion plan?
- b) What books will you use for your devotion?
- c) What time each day will you use for your devotion?
- d) Who is going to lead the devotion?

Consider teaming up with another family in the congregation. Regularly pray for and encourage each other so you continue your formal devotions and improve them.

How is your personal Bible study going? There's nothing better than time in the Word to help you make the most of informal worship opportunities with your children.

Preview of the next session

There is a temptation for us to compartmentalize our lives. Our sinful natures want to isolate God to the margins of our lives so that our Christianity has little to do with Monday morning or Saturday night. But we do not have one life that is devoted to God, another to our work, another to our family, and still another to the pursuit of entertainment. Our whole lives are devoted to our Savior, whose whole life was devoted to us. As Christians, we want our faith in Christ to be seen in every detail of our lives. Next time, we will discuss applying our Christian faith to the details of daily life. Specifically, we will look at discipline, communication, and dealing with money and possessions.

Important: Encourage participants to bring along their Bibles for Session Five, or have Bibles available. Not all passages in the next session will be printed in the parents' copy.

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 501

Possible reading: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Five

Love One Another as Dearly Loved Children

NOTE: As we come to this “nuts and bolts of daily life” session, many participants may be thinking, “Well, finally this study is getting practical!” The author strongly disagrees with that judgment. Personal study of the Word and family sharing of the Word are the most practical activities an individual Christian and a Christian family can do.

Only the power of the Spirit in the means of grace is able to renew and recharge our faith so that we are able to apply our Christianity in a practical way to the everyday details of life. As families, we don't just need better how-to lists. A how-to is by definition **law** and, therefore, lacks any power to fulfill what it prescribes. Consider how many how-tos we know but do not follow. What we need is the power and motivation God gives in his Word, so that we run in the paths the Lord has put before us. As the psalmist writes, “I run in the path of your commands [God's law—his how-to list for life], for you have set my heart free [God's gospel]” (Psalm 119:32).

That is why this session comes last. Even within this session, there will be strong reminders that these actions are not what make us Christians, rather, these are the Christian actions of those who are empowered and dearly loved children of God.

Introduction

How can you tell if people are devoted (insert the name of the team of your choice) football fans?

It's not just for three hours on Sunday afternoon that they reveal their devotion to their team. They probably own some team apparel that they wear on a regular basis. Their homes may be decorated with team memorabilia and their conversations are sprinkled with references to favorite players and memorable plays.

How does that relate to the devotion Christian families show for Christ?

Being a Christian family means more than spending a few hours at church together or even spending regular time in the Word as individuals, as a couple, or as a family. We trust that the fruit of our contact with the means of grace will be revealed in everything about us as we go about our lives as children of God.

Today we are going to encourage one another in three specific areas in which families live their faith.

Part One: As you remember your power to love one another

Setting the scene

Paul spent the first three chapters of Ephesians painting a beautiful portrait of the bride of Christ—the holy Christian church. We have been brought from death to life by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the water of Baptism, he clothed us as his bride in the beautiful wedding garments of salvation. Now, how is that bride to live?

Ephesians 5:1,2 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Understanding the point

What does Paul mean by calling us to “be imitators of God”?

We are called to be little “Christs” to all those around us. As his sacrificing love freely put our needs first, so we put the needs of others above our own.

In the midst of encouragement to live our faith in everyday life, why does Paul remind us that we are “dearly loved children”?

Imitating God does not come naturally for any of us. Only the gospel can empower us to imitate God. The same merciful love of God that saved us also empowers and strengthens us to love one another. Since we are prized and cherished children of God in Jesus, we are freed from living lives of narrow self-interest. We are freed and enabled to spend our lives loving one another just as we are dearly loved.

Taking it home

Evaluate these statements: The time we have spent in this Bible study, talking about being in the Word personally and as families, could have been shortened to make more time for practical how-tos for Christian living. We really need to spend more time on the dos and don'ts of Christian living.

It is beneficial to spend time looking at God's will for our lives (as we are doing in this session). But without the empowering means of grace at work in our lives, all the how-to lists in the world will do us no good. Without the Word at work in our hearts with both law and gospel, we will either become Pharisees, trying to fool ourselves into thinking we are doing well, or we will despair as we realize how far short we fall from living genuine love for one another.

Part Two: As you discipline your children

Setting the scene

The book of Proverbs, from the inspired pen of King Solomon, is a marvelous book of the Bible. But to understand it correctly, we must keep its purpose in mind. It *was not* written to teach us what standards we must live up to if we *really* want to be called children of God. It *was* written to help dearly loved children of God find clear direction in putting their gospel strength to work in their lives.

Proverbs 19:18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.

Understanding the point

According to Solomon, what is the reason a Christian parent is careful to discipline his son or daughter?

We do not want to be an accomplice in our children's spiritual death.

In what way would failing to discipline your child make you "a willing party to his death"? Can you think of a biblical example of just such parenting?

To fail to call our children to repentance for their sins would be to allow sin to dominate their lives. The Holy Spirit will either rule their hearts and lives in a spirit of repentance and faith, or their sinful natures will control their lives and actions. Spiritual warfare is constantly being waged within our children—just as within us. Parents are one of the Spirit's resources to employ the weapons that help our children enjoy Christ's victory in that war. A biblical example of careless parenting would be the story of Eli (1 Samuel 2–4). His failure to discipline his sons became an offense to the whole nation of Israel.

State Solomon's point positively. What is the ultimate goal of Christian discipline?

Our ultimate goal is to be God's tools so that our children will live forever as his own. Christian parents must always remember that the primary goal of our discipline is to guide our children to grow in faith, not just to conform outwardly to our expectations.

When can you say you have completed a certain act of discipline? Read the words from 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 (written as Paul was concluding an act of church discipline in Corinth) to help you find the answer. "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him."

Our discipline is not complete until we have assured repentant children that God has removed their sin from them and that we too have forgiven them. We need to "reaffirm" our love for them so that they can see that forgiveness means the event is over and done with. If a consequence needs to continue (for example: grounding or some other loss of privilege), we need to be clear that this does not mean that forgiveness is dependent on that consequence. While the consequence may remain for some time, we need all our other dealings with our children to show that we are not holding a grudge against them. Remember, love "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

What further encouragement do you want to give to your children as you forgive them and assure them of your continued love? Consider these words of encouragement Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

We need to assure our children of God's help when that same temptation wants to grab them the next time. Assure them that God has promised them a "way out" so that they will have the strength to stand up against that temptation. Satan wants us to believe his lie that we are caught in sinful ruts from which we cannot free ourselves. However, the truth is that we have been freed by Christ not only from sin's guilt but also from sin's power over us. No temptation owns us! Christ owns us!

Taking it home

Evaluate this statement: "Sure, I'm a lot more lenient than my parents were. But I'm convinced that I'm doing a lot less harm than my parents did with overly strict discipline."

Christian parents can err in both directions. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul urges us not to “exasperate” our children. Too many rules and discipline administered harshly instead of lovingly can encourage rebellion. However, it almost goes without saying that many parents today are tempted to be too lenient, rather than too strict. The temptation is to try to be our children’s buddies instead of their parents. Either excess (too strict or too lenient) can harm the children.

Since parents can err in being either too lenient or too strict, let’s make a list of warnings in both directions as we search Proverbs for more of God’s wisdom.

Warnings against becoming too lenient:

Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:15,17

To refuse to discipline children carefully and faithfully is to hate them. Physical punishment (not abuse) and other punishments for disobedience, lovingly and yet firmly administered, are an important part of caring for children.

Proverbs 1:8,9; 25:11,12; 26:5; 27:5,6; 28:23

These passages show us that our children need us to be more than their buddies. They will have plenty of friends in life, but only moms and dads are responsible for their souls. When the sinful foolishness of their hearts reveals itself in their lives, they will need to hear things they don’t want to hear. We need to be strong enough to endure our children’s manipulative statements (“You don’t love me!” “I hate you!” “All the other parents let their kids . . .”). Do we love our children enough to allow them not to like us sometimes? In the long term, they will learn that “wounds from a friend can be trusted.”

Other warnings?

Warnings against becoming too strict:

Proverbs 13:24

This passage also serves to give the opposite warning. The passage reminds us that discipline is to be administered in love. If we lose control of our tempers or administer punishment out of embarrassment rather than love, we are out of line. We need to discipline ourselves first at those times, not our children.

Proverbs 12:16,18; 14:29; 15:1; 17:27; 29:11

These passages remind us that discipline doesn’t consist of commenting on every imperfection we see. There are times, for instance, just after we have administered discipline, that we will be wise to turn a “blind eye” to a roll of the eyes or a pouting expression on the face. These passages also remind us that sarcasm and a cutting tongue have no place in a parent’s discipline arsenal. Again, when anger gets the better of us, we need to discipline ourselves before we can discipline our children. Discipline doesn’t need to be shouted to be effective. A firm but calmly spoken rebuke may often keep us from aggravating an already hot situation.

Proverbs 4:23; 23:15-18

Overly harsh discipline often comes when we are more concerned with the outward action than with the heart and motivation behind the action. We may be able to rigidly dictate our young children’s every action, but we are tempting their sinful nature to crave the day when they will be out from under our thumbs. And guess what will happen then. We need to remember that we are working as the Spirit’s tools to help our children become less and less dependent on us and more

and more self-disciplined. We accomplish that with the Spirit's power by being consistent in calling them to repentance and even more persistent in assuring them of God's (and our own) forgiveness and his help in temptation. Our job as parents is to work ourselves out of a job.

Proverbs 28:13

Often, when we are overly strict with others, we may be ignoring our own need for repentance and forgiveness. In addition, when we have dealt with our children wrongfully, we need to model openly for them what it means to live by repentance and forgiveness. It is *not* a sign of weakness to say to our children, "Please, forgive me!" That is a sign of spiritual maturity, and they will respect us more than if we "stonewall" when they know we were in the wrong.

Other warnings?

Before we go on to Part Three, take a moment to go to the HOMEwork section at the end of this session. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make in your Christian discipline. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or a with another Bible study participant.

Part Three: As you communicate with one another

Setting the scene

Children (and adults!) admire those who can train wild animals at the zoo or circus. Taming such wild animals is a special skill that requires wisdom and patience. But as the book of James reminds us, taming wild animals is nothing compared to the difficulty of taming the tongue. Let's turn to the book of James for Spirit-given wisdom and patience in taming our tongues in order to make the communication in our homes a blessing to all.

James 1:19,20 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Understanding the point

With his very first words, how does James beautifully point us back to the power and motivation for striving for Christlike communication in our homes?

When James calls us "my dear brothers," he is recalling our special place in the family of God. We are "dear brothers" because we are dearly loved sons and daughters of God.

How will our communication with family members (and with others) be blessed when we are “quick to listen, slow to speak”?

Consider how often disagreements have flared up because we never really understood what the other person was saying. Our sinful natures are quick to jump to the worst conclusions and quick to get irritated and defensive. When we listen patiently and curb our tongues, we are taking giant steps toward improving the spirit of communication in our homes.

James also mentions being “slow to become angry.” What are the causes of our anger and the cures for our anger as we listen to others?

Causes

Proverbs 18:13

When someone shares something that is bothering him, we may be quick to assume he is blaming us for the problem.

Proverbs 20:9

When someone has a problem with us, our proud sinful hearts may refuse to admit that we may have indeed hurt the other. A guilty conscience tries to cover itself by quickly lashing out with unkind and defensive words. Often we may begin to throw blame right back at the person speaking to us.

Other causes?

Cures

Proverbs 18:13

This also reminds us that to answer before we listen is shameful and foolish. We may miss a family member’s point completely. (Warning: When we are the ones airing what bothers us, we also need to be careful about setting a pattern of always blaming someone else for what is bothering us.)

Proverbs 20:9

None of us can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin.” Even when someone’s rebuke isn’t patient and loving, we should still consider that we may have indeed wronged a family member by unloving words or actions. (Remember also the opposite point: When we are the ones speaking about wrongs done to us, we need to speak as humbly and gently as possible, lest we tempt the other to hide behind a facade of defensiveness.)

Seek to help participants find the cures God gives us in his Word for each cause that is listed.

Taking it home

One of the most challenging tasks in communicating with others is to slow ourselves down before we answer so that we can truly listen to one another without jumping to conclusions. Often our conclusions are false and defensive and lead to needless quarrels. We may have misunderstood one another. That may lead to the feeling that the other person really has not listened at all. While there are many different ways to practice listening to one another, one way is to cultivate the skill called active listening. In active listening, before you reply with your answers, ideas, or solutions, you do two things:

Step 1: Paraphrase what you believe the other is saying. Pay special attention to the emotions that are expressed or displayed. (Examples: “What I hear you saying is that . . .”; “Do you mean that . . .”; “If I understand you correctly, you are thinking that . . .”; or “Sounds like you are feeling . . .”)

Putting their thoughts into your own words does three things:

- 1) It checks to make sure you have understood them correctly, giving them a chance to clarify their point if you misunderstood.
- 2) It indicates that you have indeed been listening to them.
- 3) It allows them to clarify and better understand their own thinking and feelings by hearing their thoughts “played back” to them.

Step 2: Ask questions to get more information on what you did not understand or to get an explanation of important points.

- 1) Asking questions further expresses interest in the person and in what he or she is sharing with you.
- 2) Asking questions also allows the other to “paint” a more complete picture of what he or she is describing to you. (Proverbs 20:5: “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.”)

Warning: We need to avoid using this skill to manipulate people, rather than to show Christ-like love. (“If I act like I’m listening, maybe they will agree with me.”) We constantly need to remember that our motivation for loving communication is to listen and speak in patient love as dearly loved brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Let’s practice this skill right now. Pair up with your spouse or another member of the class. Ask the other to comment on his or her choice of one of the following topics. Practice the two steps of active listening. Before you offer any of your own thoughts or ideas about the subject, be sure that you have paraphrased what you believe the other is saying and that you have asked questions to draw out more details. Each person is allowed five minutes.

Topics for active listening:

- The one thing that scares me most about raising children in the 21st century is . . .
- The greatest blessing of our Christian faith for this life is . . .
- If I could ask God one question, it would be . . .

Before we go on to Part Four, take a moment to go to the HOMEwork section at the end of this session. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make regarding Christian communication in your home. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or another member of the class.

Part Four: As you wisely use God’s gift of wealth

Setting the scene

If there ever was a person in world history who had it all, that person was King Solomon. He was the wisest, richest, and most powerful man of his day. But his abuse of his wealth and power destroyed his faith for a time and almost cost him his eternal soul. It’s no wonder that the Spirit used him to coin the following proverb. (We in wealthy America can learn a great deal from it.)

Proverbs 30:7-9 *“Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.”*

Understanding the point

In what way can riches tempt us to “disown” our Lord?

United States coins are inscribed with the words “In God We Trust.” As wealth increases, it becomes easier and easier for our trust to shift from the true God to the money itself. Financial security is a deceptive lie of Satan if we begin to depend on our wealth for our security in life. Our security is always founded in God through Christ, never in his earthly gifts to us. By the way, remember that Solomon was speaking from bitter experience as he wrote those words.

When Solomon spoke of dishonoring God’s name by stealing, he certainly included the obvious forms of stealing that can land someone in jail. However, in what other ways might we be tempted to “steal” when times are tough? (Though these actions would be sin in God’s eyes, they probably wouldn’t concern the police at all.)

Malachi 3:8 and following reminds us that we may be tempted to “rob” God by withholding the first and best of our offerings from him when times get tough. We may also “steal” from those in need by becoming selfish with God’s blessings to us. We may also be tempted to make getting ahead the biggest goal of our lives and “steal” from our families the time and attention God wants us to give to them. Also, on April 15 the numbers we record on our tax return may not quite match what we really earned because some earnings came in the form of untraceable cash.

Taking it home

There is a tremendous difference between the sinful world’s attitude toward money and possessions and the attitude the Lord looks for in us. In the following chart (adapted from *Healthy Families: A Manual for Christian Family Living* produced by Fox Valley Lutheran High School), fill in the third and fourth columns, which express the worldly person’s attitude toward money and possessions and the Christian’s.

<i>God Says</i>	<i>The Issue</i>	<i>The World Says</i>	<i>The Christian Says</i>
The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it (Psalm 24:1).	Ownership	As the commercial used to say, “After all, it’s <i>your</i> money!” We love to say, “Mine!”	We are but stewards of what is and always will remain God’s.
Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights (James 1:17).	The Source of Blessings	The world would have us believe that what we work hard for is ours by right.	All we have is a gift of God. Our abilities, opportunities, health, jobs, and much more, are all God’s gifts.

<i>God Says</i>	<i>The Issue</i>	<i>The World Says</i>	<i>The Christian Says</i>
<p>But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33).</p>	<p>The Reliability of God</p>	<p>Worldly people want us to worry and fret with them, as if it all depends on us. How foolish we are if we put that pressure on ourselves!</p>	<p>He who has made us part of his kingdom through the righteousness of his Son knows how to give us “all these [lesser] things” as well (food, clothing, shelter, and all we need for our body and life).</p>
<p>What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)</p>	<p>What Really Matters in Life</p>	<p>Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that says, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins!” Unfortunately, what he “wins” is an all-expense paid trip to hell.</p>	<p>Even if we could “corner the market” on everything in the world, if it costs us our eternal souls, the cost is far too great. Only our Lord Jesus is worth everything.</p>
<p>For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:14,15).</p>	<p>Our Purpose in Life</p>	<p>To the sinful nature, our three favorite people are me, myself, and I. The world lives to make use of all it possesses to serve Number One.</p>	<p>In a sense, so does the Christian—except Number One is Jesus, not self. Since he lived for us, the purpose of life is now to make use of all we have to his honor and glory and for the benefit of all those he puts around us.</p>
<p>Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Proverbs 3:9,10).</p>	<p>Generous Firstfruit Giving</p>	<p>The world views giving to God as a waste of hard-earned cash. Why give away what you have earned and what is yours? Besides, the more you give the less you have for your needs (and wants).</p>	<p>All we are and have is a gift of God’s grace. We therefore honor his love for us by returning to him a generous portion of our first and best. And as an added bonus, God promises we will never be able to out-give him.</p>

List three specific steps Christian families can take to testify that they live by God's view of money and possessions and not the world's.

When children are old enough to receive an allowance or earn some money, we can help them to remember the Lord first. It's easier for them to learn that when dealing with \$1, \$10, and \$20 than when they're dealing with \$10,000 or \$20,000.

We need to be careful of the American desire to satisfy every craving of our children (not to mention our own) immediately. No matter how much we have, it will never be enough for our discontented sinful natures. Pray that God's gracious love for us might teach our hearts to be content with the things he has already given us. We can fight the urge, which is so prevalent in America, to view ourselves as nothing more than consumers of goods and services.

Together with our children, we can practice sharing our blessings with those in need, remembering the words of Proverbs 19:17: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done."

(There are countless other suggestions that class participants might offer.)

Go to the HOMEwork section that follows. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make in the way your family deals with God's material blessings. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or a member of the class.

HOMEwork



With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in our Christian discipline:

1)

2)

With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in our Christian communication:

1)

2)

With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in the way we use our money and possessions so that it reflects our Christian faith:

1)

2)

Also, don't forget that God supplies his strength through his means of grace. Don't drop your plans for making better use of his Word in your home personally and as a family. Don't give up making the most of your opportunities to use Word and sacrament in your church family. May God bless you and make you a blessing to many. As you strive to carry out the Savior's work in your home, always remember that "your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Remember that Session Six of this Bible study is not intended to be used immediately after Session Five. Consider inviting the class participants to return for an encouragement session about six to eight weeks later. That allows them time to begin putting to work the things they discussed in the first five sessions of this study. They can discuss with the other families what is going well and what isn't. Following up about two months later also gives the opportunity to encourage them if they have begun to let their plans "slide."

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 500

Possible reading: Psalm 128

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Six

Put It to Work (Optional)

(Suggestion: Use Session Six as a follow-up several weeks after Session Five.)

Introduction

Before lighting the charcoal briquettes for a cookout, how do you arrange them in the grill?

(Answer: You pile them up.)

Why do you do that?

(Answer: As one coal heats up, it helps its “neighbors” warm up more quickly at the same time.)

The Holy Spirit gathers Christians together to study and share his Word for a very similar reason. Just as the pieces of charcoal heat one another up because they are piled together, so the Holy Spirit brings us together so that we can encourage one another with his Word. As we share the Word with one another, he fans our faith into flame.

Today we are gathering once again to encourage one another to study the Word personally and to teach the Word formally and informally to our children. If your study has prospered under God’s blessing, you can encourage us by sharing what you have done. If your plans have “fizzled,” you can be encouraged through the Word to renew those plans and put them to work again. Today let’s remember that it is important to listen as God’s Word encourages you personally and as a family.

Part One: The importance of putting to work the things you’ve heard

Setting the scene

The Sermon on the Mount is one of our Savior’s longest single discourses recorded in the Bible. The section below, from Matthew chapter 7, is the conclusion to that sermon. Note carefully what Jesus wanted his hearers to do with the words he preached.

Matthew 7:24-27 *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds*

blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Understanding the point

In Jesus’ parable, what makes the difference between a house that stands and one that falls?

The house that stands has its foundation on rock, an immovable substance. The other house falls because its foundation is on shifting sand. In other words, it’s what the foundation is built on that makes the difference.

People will react to Jesus’ Word in one of two ways. Describe those two ways.

Jesus compares the house built on rock to someone who hears his words and then puts them into practice. Jesus compares the house on sand to someone who hears his words and lets them go in one ear and out the other. Faith and unbelief are the two reactions. What does it mean to put Jesus’ words into practice? These two passages point us to the answer: “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope” (Psalm 130:5). “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).

The first place to put Jesus’ words into practice is in our hearts. First and foremost, Jesus’ words require a humble faith that trusts whatever he promises us. Nothing delights our Savior more than our hope and faith in his promises. Second, Jesus wants us to put his words into practice as the Holy Spirit moves us to live what we believe.

Taking it home

In the parable, storms pound both houses regardless of their foundation. What truth of everyday life is Jesus teaching us with that fact?

Sometimes we imagine that believing in Jesus and following his Word results in lives that are trouble free. Nowhere has Jesus promised that. The storms of life strike those who let Jesus’ words bounce off them and also strike those who build their lives on his words. In fact, Christians will often have troubles that come just because they confess Christ and live their faith. Look at the message in 1 Peter for biblical proof of that.

Storms will hit us as long as we live. What advantage, then, is there for us Christians to build our homes on the rock of Jesus’ words?

The advantage is that our lives and our homes will stand through the storms of life because the words of Jesus give us an immovable foundation. Although God doesn’t promise that our personal or family lives won’t have storms, he promises us that he will keep us safe through them. Each Christian and each Christian family can be confident that they have the world’s strongest foundation and the only eternal foundation there is. In addition, our Lord gives his people the spiritual strength to accept his all-wise and gracious will for their lives, especially when his will includes suffering (See Romans 5:3-5 and 8:28).

Part Two: How has it been going?

This section provides an excellent opportunity to divide your large group into small discussion groups. For each small group, appoint a discussion leader and secretary to report its findings to the large group. Ask the groups to discuss each question (1-3) for five minutes. Be sure to take special note of the suggestions under the third question. In that answer, we will hear our families tell us how we can serve them better.

As you consider your personal Bible study and formal and informal sharing of the Word with your children,

- 1) what has been going well for you?
- 2) what have you found to be the greatest challenges that get in your way?
- 3) what more can your church family do to encourage your personal Bible study and formal and informal sharing of God's Word?

Part Three: A closing encouragement

Setting the scene

Ephesians is one of Paul's prison letters, written during his imprisonment in Rome. Although Paul was separated by many miles from the Christians in Ephesus, he regularly prayed for them. In Ephesians 3, Paul informs the Ephesian believers that he is praying for their spiritual growth. What a wonderful prayer this is! Our Lord wants each of us and each member of our families to pray such prayers.

***Ephesians 3:14-21** For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Understanding the point

Paul asks God to give the Ephesians three blessings. Study the verses of the Ephesian passage.

For what blessings does he pray in these verses?

- 1) Verses 16 and 17

Paul prays that the Holy Spirit will strengthen the Ephesian Christians so that Christ might fill their hearts. Take note of the power of the Holy Spirit that is God's gift to us through his Word, Baptism, and Holy Communion (the means of grace). That powerful Word is the only source of real change in the hearts and lives of God's children.

- 2) Verses 17 and 18

Paul also prays that they may be able to grasp "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." The love of Christ is like the depths of the ocean. Our Lord encourages us to do more than just get our feet wet in the shallows near the shore. We will want to explore and grasp the deeper parts of the amazing and gracious love of Christ.

- 3) Verse 19

Paul expresses his confidence that God would bless the Ephesian Christians with a strong, solid faith in Christ.

What two reasons for Paul's confidence are given in verse 20?

Paul could pray confidently for two reasons. First, although Paul had asked for great things, he knew that God can always do more than we can either ask or imagine. Second, as the Ephesian Christians used the means of grace, the power of God was at work in their lives.

Taking it home

Why can we have the same confidence that God's Word will accomplish great things for us and for our families?

First, God is still able to do more than we can even ask or imagine. Second, as we (personally and as families) make use of the means of grace, God's power is at work in us as well. This promise of God will not prove false: "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey [guard] it" (Luke 11:28).

HOMEwork

Be sure to allow parents ample time to make plans before they go home. This serves a dual purpose. First, planning during the session avoids the danger that daily activities and commitments will usurp their planning time. Second, this allows them to share their plans with other families. That is helpful for families who want to team up so that they can encourage each other.



Make specific plans outlining how you will improve (1) your personal study of the Word and (2) your formal and informal sharing of the Word with your children.

Consider again the wisdom of teaming up with another individual or family with whom you will share your plans in order to encourage one another regularly. Since the spiritual growth of our families is vitally important, let's make use of all the Christian encouragement we can find.

Closing devotion

Speak or sing together these hymn stanzas as your closing prayer:

Oh, blest the house, whate'er befall,
Where Jesus Christ is all in all!
A home that is not wholly his—
How sad and poor and dark it is!

Then here will I and mine today
A solemn promise make and say:
Though all the world forsake his Word,
I and my house will serve the Lord!

(Christian Worship 506:1,5)

Share the Promise With Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

by
Richard Gurgel

Second in a series of Bible studies on parenting written for the Christ-Light religion curriculum and included in the Strong Roots for Tender Shoots program.

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Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session One

Hey, Mom and Dad! YOU Are God's Key People!

Introduction

Part One: God gives you “parent power” in your home

No human being will have a greater influence on the lives of your children than you do. Every moment of every day, your words and actions shape and mold your children. It is never a question of whether you will exert this “parent power.” The only question is this: will your influence be positive or negative?

Realize that you don't have this influence by accident. God designed it that way. The moment God made you parents, he placed this awesome power into your hands. How are you using it?

Let's take a look at a biblical example of this principle of parent power at work.

Setting the scene

In order to understand these words from Exodus chapter 20, we must remember that God was speaking from Mount Sinai. This message thundered from God as the whole mountain was shaking and smoking.

Exodus 20:3-6 You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Understanding the point

In verse 5, God certainly is not talking about holding children accountable for sins they themselves have not committed. In Ezekiel chapter 18 and elsewhere in Scripture, God clearly tells us that he does not

operate that way. Therefore, what must be true about the third and fourth generations of those who come from fathers who “hate” God?

Taking it home

What is God saying about the importance of parenting roles to successive generations?

Sometimes we get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of daily existence and making ends meet that we lose sight of our goal as parents. Picture your children and grandchildren talking about you after you are in heaven. They are thanking God for blessings given through you. What do you want them to say?

Part Two: God defines how to use parent power

God intends that parents use the parent power he has given them in two ways. First of all, God intends for parents to use their parent power to share his promise of salvation by speaking God’s Word to their children. There’s proof of the importance of sharing God’s Word verbally.

Setting the scene

Psalm 78 is a powerful reminder that Christianity is never more than one generation old. God gives each generation the mission to pass on the knowledge of salvation to the next generation. When that task is neglected, the knowledge of the true God and his salvation may soon be lost.

Psalm 78:1-8 *O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
They would not be like their forefathers—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*

Understanding the point

What triple blessing results when parents do not “hide” these things from their children?

Look at the last verse. What is the sad result whenever the Holy Spirit is denied the opportunity to work his wonders in human hearts through the Word?

Taking it home

As children begin attending Sunday school and Lutheran elementary school, why might parents be tempted to reduce or stop their spiritual training at home?

Why do children need to hear God’s Word from their parents and not just from pastors and teachers?

If you consider the home, church, and Lutheran school (where available) to be a team, what role do you see each team member playing?

Which team member will tend to have the greatest impact on the children?

God intends that parents use their parent power a second way—to model trust in the Lord for their children. This parent power is always at work. Here again the only question is whether the model is positive or negative.

Setting the scene

We see both a positive and a negative example in the account of Abraham and his son, Isaac. First, the positive example:

Both Abraham and Isaac were aliens and strangers living in a foreign land. They realized they did not fit in with the unbelieving Canaanites around them. We need to understand how wicked the Canaanite society around Abraham and Isaac was. Four centuries later God commanded the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites completely when they conquered the land under Joshua’s command. At the time of Joshua, male and female prostitution and the sacrifice of children as burnt offerings were just two of the religious practices of the Canaanite people.

***Genesis 24:1-4** Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.”*

***Genesis 28:1,2** So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: “Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother’s father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.”*

Understanding the point

As he nurtured Isaac, Abraham modeled a spiritual concern which Isaac remembered and later copied as he dealt with his own son Jacob. What was that spiritual concern?

Setting the scene

Now, the negative example:

Scripture doesn't hold fake saints before us. It shows us God's people with their "warts and all." The patriarchs of old were not perfect parents; they lived in daily need of a Savior every bit as much as we do. These verses from Genesis chapters 25 and 37 will give proof of that.

Genesis 25:27,28 The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Genesis 37:3 Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him.

Understanding the point

What weakness in Isaac's life showed up in the life of his son Jacob?

Taking it home

Why is the home *the* place for putting this power of Christian modeling to work?

Here is a way to see parent power at work in your own family: List the beliefs and habits—both positive and negative—that you learned from your parents.

Positive:

Negative:

Now take a moment to list the beliefs and habits—both positive and negative—that you are passing on to your children.

Positive:

Negative:

As you look at your two sets of lists, consider this: What are the similarities between the two lists? Also, are the beliefs, attitudes, and values you are passing down to your children the ones you want to hand down as a legacy for the next three to four generations?

Part Three: God promises the strength to carry out your responsibilities

Setting the scene

Joyful confidence in the Lord is the recurring theme of Paul's letter to his congregation in Philippi. That is stunning in light of the fact that our Lord inspired Paul to write this letter while he was a prisoner in Rome. The next Bible passage tells of Paul's contentment and confidence in Christ. Paul was not sitting on a cruise ship when he wrote this letter in which he tells us not to worry. When he wrote, his very life was hanging in the balance.

Philippians 4:12,13 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Understanding the point

Though Paul faced the daily uncertainties of life as a prisoner in Rome, what gave him the confidence that he could meet the challenges each day would bring?

Taking it home

What is the "strength" Christ gives us, even as we consider the times when we failed to use God's gift of parent power?

What is the "strength" for the future that we receive from Christ to carry out our responsibilities as Christian parents?

HOMEwork



Set aside some quiet time this week to consider three strengths and three weaknesses of your family unit. If God has blessed you with a Christian spouse, plan some uninterrupted time together to talk this over.

- 1) Thank God for the Christian strengths you find in your household.
- 2) Honestly confess as sin whatever you find that is contrary to God's will. Return to the water of your baptism and drown those sins by daily repentance.
- 3) Remember that from the water of your baptism, you arose with the power of Christ. You have the power of Christ to help you live differently. The patterns of the past do not need to dominate the future. Begin to think and talk about what you can do, by the grace of God, to build on the strengths and to overcome the weaknesses.
- 4) Ask your children to list the things about your family for which they are thankful to God. Ask them also what they wish were different. Let them know that you want them to talk openly about this.

Preview of the next session

What is the single most important thing a father and mother can do to help their home grow in Christ?
We'll find out next time!

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 506

Possible reading: Psalm 145:1-10

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Two

Wanted: Spiritual Parents to Raise Spiritual Children

Introduction

Part One: The best gift Christian parents can give to their children

Setting the scene

Imagine running a food distribution service for the poor widows in a congregation of more than ten thousand people! As the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem grew rapidly, certain needs also grew. It was difficult to care for both the spiritual and physical well-being of all the believers. The apostles needed help so that they could concentrate on prayer and the administration of the means of grace.

Acts 6:1-4 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Understanding the point

The apostles selected seven men to oversee the food distribution for the widows in the congregation. If you were to develop a job description from verse 1, what qualities would you look for first in the job applicants?

However, according to verse 3, what is the chief quality that the Twelve were looking for in the men who were to be chosen?

Taking it home

The Jerusalem congregation considered it important that those entrusted with distributing food be “full of the Spirit and wisdom.” Why is it even more important that those whom God entrusts with the gift of children be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” as well?

How does one get full of the Spirit and wisdom? (Jesus’ words from John 6:63 will help: “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”)

Part Two: The importance of personal time in God’s Word for every Christian—especially a Christian parent

Let’s consider three reasons why personal study of the Word is important.

Reason 1

Setting the scene

Paul is one of the greatest champions of the gospel found on the pages of Scripture. He was an apostle, an inspired author of 13 books of the New Testament, and an extraordinary missionary. But here he gives us a glimpse into the spiritual struggles he had to fight daily, just as we also must.

Romans 7:21-25 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Understanding the point

What two opposing forces did Paul find to be at war within him?

Where did Paul find victory in this war?

What is the final victory in this war?

Taking it home

If we examine our spiritual condition as Paul did, we will confess that the same war rages within every one of us. The evidence can be seen when we lose patience with one another in our homes or when our words and actions reflect the world’s attitudes and values rather than our faith in Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit to lead us constantly to repentance and to take us back daily to the cross, where we find the victory won by our Savior.

If we are not daily in God's Word, what happens in the struggle within us between the sinful nature and the new self?

What happens in that struggle when we are regularly in touch with God's Word?

Complete this sentence: "My personal time in the Savior's Word is important for me because . . ."

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

Agree or disagree: Being prepared for spiritual battle by studying the Word may be more important than ever because it is more difficult than ever to live as Christians in an unbelieving world.

Reason 2

Setting the scene

We all have had more than one of "those days," when everything seems to go wrong. Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, was having one when the Lord inspired him to write that psalm. The whole first half is a bitter complaint, which he poured out to the Lord. Asaph complained that God seems to treat the wicked better in this life than his own believers. Even as his heart cried out in the midst of his struggle, God sent Asaph the answer in the last part of the psalm.

Psalm 73:23-28 Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

Understanding the point

What is the psalmist's comfort in the midst of his discouragement and trouble? (Look especially at the first four lines.)

Taking it home

When do we need the Lord to hold us by his right hand and to guide us with his counsel?

How does he do that for us?

Complete this sentence: “My personal time in the Savior’s Word is also important for me because . . .”

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

Evaluate this statement: Many Christians foolishly spend time struggling with personal and family problems because they have not sought out the counsel God has given in his Word.

Reason 3

Setting the scene

Sheep are among the most defenseless animals. Sheep depend on the shepherd for almost everything. Having a good and caring shepherd means the difference between life and death. In John chapter 10, Jesus calls himself our Shepherd, and he calls us his sheep.

John 10:1-5 [Jesus said,] “I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”

Understanding the point

Why is it important that the sheep learn to recognize the voice of their shepherd?

How do sheep learn to know his voice well?

Taking it home

Why is it important that we learn to recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd?

What are some of the voices Satan uses to try to confuse us (sheep of Christ) and to throw us off track?

How do we learn to know our Shepherd’s voice so well that we will never follow a stranger?

Complete this sentence: “My personal time in the Savior’s Word is also important for me because . . .”

Why is that personal reason for being in the Word also important in your role as a parent?

Part Three: Getting into the Word

The Bible may be the most respected book in the world; many people speak highly of it. But, sad to say, the Bible may also be the most neglected book in the world. An October 2000 Gallup poll indicated that 63 percent of Americans read the Bible once a month or less.

What are the chief roadblocks that keep us from reading God’s Word more often?

How do these passages give us solutions to those roadblocks?

Mark 8:36 *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?*

Luke 10:41,42 *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

Psalms 119:18 *Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.*

Luke 11:28 *Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and obey it.* (Perhaps a more literal translation for “obey it” would be “guard it”)

How would you respond to a Christian friend who says this to you: “I worship regularly and often attend Bible classes at church. I don’t see why reading my Bible at home is so important.”

HOMEwork



Consider how to increase your contact with your Savior’s Word.

For public worship:

If you do not presently worship and attend Bible class/Sunday school together as a family every Sunday, consider making this commitment: attend worship and Bible class/Sunday school for the next seven Sundays, unless God makes it impossible.

For personal study:

- 1) Consider what can be removed from your schedule to make time for personal study of the Word. Strive to use the same time each day. Remember, it is really a matter of subtracting what is of lesser importance from our busy schedules, not of adding more to what may be an already overloaded schedule.
- 2) Plan how you will begin your study:
 - a) If you have never studied the Bible on your own before, perhaps begin by using a study guide such as a commentary from The People's Bible series from Northwestern Publishing House.
 - b) If you have a long commute to work, consider purchasing the Bible on tape and listening to it in your car.
 - c) Check out the Guide for Christian Home Bible Readers that is part of this Bible study. It will give you further helps and ideas for your personal study of the Word.
- 3) Inform a member of your family or your church family of your Bible reading plans, and ask them to encourage you regularly, perhaps even by reading the same section of Scripture that you are reading.

Preview of the next session

In many homes the Word is not being shared by families as often as they would like it to be. What gets in the way? How can families overcome those obstacles? Next time we will consider those obstacles and the power of God's grace to overcome them.

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 283 or 284

Possible reading: Psalm 1

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Three

Overcome the Obstacles to Sharing the Promise with Your Children

Introduction

The phone rings at your house. It is Aunt Matilda and Uncle Herbert inviting you over next Saturday to see the slides from their trip to the yarn museum. What ideas quickly flood into your head?

The phone rings again. It is your friend Dave, he just received four tickets for front row seats at the (Packers, Bears, Raiders—fill in the local team or sport of your choice) game next Monday night. Even though you already have two other commitments and some things to do around the house, what immediately comes to mind?

What makes the difference in your reaction in the two scenarios?

At the close of the last session, we considered the obstacles that hinder us in our personal study of God's Word. Now let's list what we consider to be the greatest obstacles that hinder parents from sharing the Word of Christ more frequently with their children.

Part One: The greatest obstacle remover of them all

The following is a key concept in this session: Whatever we are convinced is important and valuable is what gets done. (Think of the introduction to the session.) The most powerful obstacle remover is to consider the great things God accomplishes in our hearts and lives as we share the gospel promise with one another in our homes.

Let's consider four blessings that God gives Christian families as they share his Word together.

Setting the scene

Paul wrote 2 Timothy shortly before he was executed in Rome. He sent this letter to Timothy, his closest coworker in the ministry. Timothy's life gives us a vivid example of what God can accomplish when his Word is shared in the home.

Single Christian parents take note: Timothy's father apparently was a gentile unbeliever (Acts 16:1). Here is also proof of the great things God can accomplish through the faithful witness of one believing parent.

2 Timothy 1:5 *I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.*

2 Timothy 3:15 *From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Understanding the point

Timothy was blessed to live in a home in which the Word was shared with him already "from infancy." What blessings did Timothy gain through the Word of God shared by his mother and grandmother?

Taking it home

When your home resembles Timothy's, what is the most important blessing your children will gain as you share the Word with them?

Setting the scene

Every professional sport (and many other professions) has its "hall of fame." Chapter 11 of Hebrews is the Christian's "hall of faith." To inspire and encourage us, the author of Hebrews shares with us the life and example of believers who have gone home to heaven before us. Then in chapter 12, he applies the examples of their lives to ours.

Hebrews 11:13-16 *All these people [Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob] were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

Hebrews 12:1-3 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Understanding the point

Look at verse 13 of Hebrews 11. What did these patriarchs call themselves as they lived out their lives on earth?

What did they mean by that?

Taking it home

What sometimes makes it hard to remember that we too are “aliens and strangers on earth”?

As you share the Word in your home, how does the Holy Spirit help to readjust the focus of your lives? (Look at Hebrews 12:1-3.)

What, then, is a second blessing your family receives when you are in the Word together at home?

Setting the scene

In the last three chapters of Ephesians, the apostle Paul applies faith to daily living. The following section of chapter 4 speaks of our daily struggle to “take off” the old self, with which we were born, and to “put on” the new self, which has become ours through Baptism.

Ephesians 4:31,32 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Understanding the Point

What Paul lists in verse 31 are the products of an unforgiving heart. What Paul lists in the first part of verse 32 are the products of a forgiving heart. What is the key to changing an unforgiving heart into a forgiving heart?

Taking it home

What are some everyday examples from your family life which reveal that you are still troubled by the unwholesome elements Paul lists in verse 31?

How does regularly sharing the message of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ rid your home of “bitterness, rage and anger”?

What, then, is a third blessing your family enjoys when the Word is heard regularly within your home?

Setting the scene

The apostle Paul often begins his letters with a section of praise and thanksgiving to God for working faith and love in the hearts and lives of his believers. Second Corinthians has an extensive praise and thanksgiving section.

2 Corinthians 1:3,4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

Understanding the point

What wonderful “chain reaction” of comfort does Paul describe in these verses?

Taking it home

As you share the comfort and compassion of Christ more and more within your family circle, what skill are you teaching them?

We often complain that we Lutherans are poor at speaking about our faith to others. Why is the home such a good practice ground for sharing your faith with others?

What, then, is the fourth blessing of the Spirit found in homes that share the gospel promise?

We have only scratched the surface in listing what the Christian family can gain when it gathers around the gospel promises of God in the home. What other blessings can the Spirit work as you read and study the Word as a family?

Agree or disagree: Emphasizing the blessings of sharing God’s Word with my family leads to unrealistic expectations of what that Word will do for my family.

Part Two: Make time to share the promise with your children

Now we will address the matter of time for the Word. We live in a world of hectic schedules. At times even church and school play a part in making matters worse. This section seeks to help the Christian family understand that there will always be more things to do than there is time to do them. It all boils down to prioritizing our time for those things that are most important to us. It comes down to setting the priorities for our lives, instead of letting the unbelieving world and the pressures of life set them for us.

Setting the scene

When God completed his work of creation in six 24-hour days, it was time for a report card on his creative work. God received a straight A. The work was perfect.

Genesis 1:5,8,13,19,23,31 There was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

There was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

There was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

There was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

There was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Understanding the point

What part of everyday life was included in the summary that everything was “very good”? (Hint: God began this on the first day of creation, and it has been a fact of life every day since.)

Taking it home

God urges us to take time for his Word. There are 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. That is part of God’s good plan. What are we saying if we claim to have no time?

What are some of the biggest time robbers in our homes and lives? Remember, we’re not only looking for bad things; some of the worst time robbers may be good things that have gained a priority in our lives that they do not deserve.

Evaluate this statement: Every time Christians use lack of time as a reason for not sharing the Word with their families, the excuse is really nothing more than apathy masquerading as busy-ness.

HOMEwork



- 1) Consider: Of the obstacles we discussed in this lesson, what is the primary obstacle that gets in the way of sharing the promise with your children? Pray for God’s help and strength to knock that obstacle down. Then, armed with the promise of his help, make plans to do just that.
- 2) Consider also: To what in your schedule must you say no if you are going to have time for sharing the gospel promises with your children? If you have trouble saying no, remember, you are always saying no to some things in your schedule. Since your “plate” can only hold so much, every time you say yes to one thing, something else gets shoved off your plate. We are not talking about adding to our schedules when we speak of sharing the gospel promises with our families. We are talking about subtracting.

The question really is, Who sets the priorities for your life? the Lord? or the unbelieving world? If we do not prayerfully and carefully set the priorities for our lives, by default, the unbelieving world will squeeze its priorities into our lives.

Before next week, consider what you will subtract from your schedule to allow time to regularly share the gospel promises in your family.

Preview of the next session

“All right! All right! You’ve convinced me!” you say. “I’ll share the Word with my children! But how do I do it?”

Next time, we’ll offer some practical suggestions for how to make the most of every opportunity to share the gospel promises with your children.

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 504

Possible reading: Ephesians 6:1-4

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Four

Make the Most of Every Opportunity

Introduction

Part One: Formal family worship

The following are basic outward components of home worship:

- 1) Scripture reading (from the Bible or a devotion book)
- 2) Discussion (of what was read, involving the entire family)
- 3) Prayer
- 4) Music

The following components can add reverence and variety to home worship:

- 1) On occasion, begin with an invocation (“In the name of the Father . . .”).
- 2) Close with a benediction (Aaronic: “The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make his face shine on us and be gracious to us. The Lord look on us with favor and give us peace.” or Apostolic: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.”).
- 3) Make use of the psalms, either spoken in unison or sung using *Christian Worship*. It may be a wise investment for formal home worship to purchase a hymnal for each family member.
- 4) On occasion use one of the devotion formats in the front of *Christian Worship* (pages 150-153). Allow children to be worship leaders from time to time. (What are the benefits of doing that?)
- 5) Use the personal prayers found in *Christian Worship* on pages 134-139 (Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers are included here).
- 6) Other ideas?

The following are some age-specific ideas for sharing the promise with your children.

1) Ideas for infants to two-year-olds:

- a) Show pictures of Jesus (always try to use similar pictures of Jesus).
- b) Begin teaching simple songs of faith (Strong Roots for Tender Shoots, early childhood materials from Northwestern Publishing House, offers several scripturally sound selections).
- c) Purchase some CDs or cassettes of scripturally sound music to play at home or when traveling in the car.
- d) Speak simple bedtime prayers for your children until they can begin to speak them with you.
- e) Find the simplest and most colorful Bible story books.
- f) Whatever you do: repeat, repeat, repeat.
- g) Other ideas?

Wouldn't it be great if, along with "Mama" and "Dada," your little ones would learn to lisp "Jesus" as one of their first words!

2) Ideas for preschoolers:

- a) Provide more advanced Bible story books with plenty of pictures and not too many words to the page.
- b) Continue teaching simple songs of faith (and adding new ones).
- c) Play CDs or cassettes that appeal to this age.
- d) Help children learn to pray from the heart as they speak their own prayers
- e) Other ideas?

3) Ideas for elementary school children:

- a) Use more advanced Bible story books and other devotional tools.
- b) Continue helping the children learn to speak prayers in their own words.
- c) From time to time, have the children tell their favorite Bible stories, and have them explain why they are favorites.
- d) Play CDs or cassettes of scripturally sound music at home or when traveling in the car.
- e) Make use of the stories and projects designed for home use in the Christ-Light religion curriculum. This curriculum may be the one used in your Lutheran elementary school and/or Sunday school.
- f) Purchase devotion books, both for yourself as parents and for your family. Devotions focused on parenting provide biblical insight and encouragement for the task of raising children who are grounded in Jesus.

Family devotions will help parents and children grow in the knowledge of what Christ's life and death means for us all.

Many devotion books are available for use with grade school children.

Purchase devotional books that are faithful to the Scriptures and age appropriate for your children.

While the use of picturesque illustrations and stories from everyday life are needed to bring abstract truths down to the children's concrete level of understanding, be sure that the substance (the message from God's Word) is not overshadowed by the style.

Be sure that a book is clear on the basics of law and gospel. Ask these questions as you preview the devotions:

- 1) Does the author call us regularly to repentance and lead us constantly to the cross of Christ for forgiveness?
- 2) Do the devotions use God's commandments as a guide for Christian life, and do they remind us that only Christ's saving love for us gives us the motivation and power to follow that guidance?

Contact Northwestern Publishing House for other suggestions of doctrinally sound devotion books suitable for your family. Visit www.nph.net or call 1-800-662-6022 or 1-800-662-6093.

g) Other ideas?

4) Ideas for junior and senior high school teens:

- a) Perhaps this is a good time to reduce the use of other tools and begin to read selected portions of the Bible. Be sure to plan your readings and questions for discussion. One idea is to consult The People's Bible commentary series and study guides that are available.
- b) *Meditations* could also be used together with discussion questions planned ahead of time. Teens could take turns reading the devotion for the day.
- c) From time to time, ask your teen to plan the devotion for an evening. He or she can select a portion of Scripture to read, as well as prepare discussion questions and a prayer.
- d) Make use of the Christ-Light religion curriculum resources for the home. These are coordinated with materials being taught at area Lutheran high schools (and perhaps also in your church's teen Bible study.)
- e) Play Christian music that appeals to this age group.

Caution: Be aware of the difference between music that is more Lutheran in character and that which is more Reformed in character. Reformed music, which dominates the market, tends to have the spirit of a tent revival, which uses emotionally charged music to get people on their feet and up to the altar to make their "decision for Christ." Lutheran music emphasizes the objective truths of what God has done for us and trusts the beauty of the gospel to stir genuine emotions. Reformed music tends to place primary emphasis on what we are to do for God (law). Lutheran music places primary stress on what God has done for us (gospel). While there is nothing wrong with music that speaks of our subjective response to the gospel, look for music that has a primary goal of proclaiming the wonderful works of God through music. (Simple hint: Pay attention to how many times *I*, *me*, and *my* appear in the lyrics. If first person pronouns predominate, the music is most likely highly subjective in nature.)

f) Other ideas?

How would you respond to the following common objections to family devotions?

- 1) I'm not a pastor or teacher, so I'm not comfortable sharing the Word with my family.
- 2) We tried it before, and it didn't work.
- 3) We already go to church and Sunday school or Bible class together, and/or the kids are in our Lutheran elementary school. We don't want to overdo it.
- 4) We can't find a time when all of us are together on a regular basis.

Points to remember:

- 1) Daily use of God's Word and prayer are a vital part of living as a Christian.
- 2) Find and use the best time available, even if that means you start only once or twice a week at first—but start somewhere.
- 3) Begin in God's name, using a suitable pattern and simple material.
- 4) Be regular, especially at first.
- 5) Start with part of the family if the whole family is not convinced.
- 6) Make it a happy experience; don't force it in a legalistic way. ("You are supposed to love the Word, so love it!")
- 7) Plan well, and then pray, pray, and pray for God's blessings on your efforts.
- 8) Trust that God will bless your efforts as he has promised.

"We will never find the perfect solution to our tendency to let worship slide. We will never find material that will always lead us into joyful willing worship. We will never find a time that will always be right for each person in the home. We will never be able to make family worship so vital that it will displace all other activities and priorities.

"But we do not stop trying. We continue because we are God's forgiven people, because we share the message of forgiveness and salvation, because we are given the power by the Holy Spirit to grow in our relationship to God and to one another by the Word. We never stop dedicating ourselves to the privilege of worship and, forgiven and renewed, rededicating the time to worship when we fail" (Ron Schlegel, *Family Worship*, Concordia, 1981, p. 26).

Part Two: Informal worship

By informal worship we are talking about unplanned sharing of the Word during the activities of daily life. Informal worship uses everyday events as opportunities to turn our children's attention to God and his Word.

Let's look at Moses' picture of what such informal worship might look like.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

These words are often used to emphasize the importance of formal family worship, and such an application is justified. But more specifically, these words encourage parents to seize all the informal opportunities.

What are some of the informal, everyday opportunities which Moses urges parents to seize so that they share the Word with their children?

Some have called these opportunities "teachable moments" in the lives of our children. What are some other examples of such teachable moments in the life of a Christian family?

Discuss the momentous truth expressed in this quotation from a Christian author: "Sometimes we adults associate learning [only] with books and Bibles and structured devotions. But when the books are closed and the lessons are over, children go on learning. No knobs turn off their little minds." (Gloria Gaither, "Capturing Those Teachable Moments," *Moody Monthly*, September 1978, pp. 90-93.)

Here are some thoughts to help us make the most of informal opportunities:

- 1) Listen carefully to your children's questions because they can be special moments of opportunity.
- 2) Informal opportunities happen most often when you spend a good deal of time with your children. Also, be aware that quality time has a way of showing up only in the midst of a larger quantity of time. When asked how they spell *love*, children respond t-i-m-e.
- 3) Days of success and outward blessings in the lives of your children and family give you special opportunities to point them to the Lord as the source of every blessing.
- 4) Days of difficulty and hardship provide some of the most important informal opportunities to show your children that you trust "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).
- 5) Don't be afraid to admit to your children instances when you have been wrong (especially if you have wronged them). Such confession of sin is not weakness on the part of Christian parents. Rather, through such confession you show your children that you too live only by daily repentance and forgiveness. You are "sinner/saints," as they are.
- 6) Make the most of the partnership with your church and school.
 - a) Talk about the worship service on the way home from church. You might discuss these things: the main thought in the sermon and the applications to your lives, the meaning of the hymns and psalms, the content of the prayers (including special prayers), the special meaning of the Lord's Supper (for a communion service).

- b) Ask your children about the Sunday school lesson or youth Bible study discussion. You might ask these questions: Who were the main people in the lesson? What happened? What did the Lord do? How do the Bible truths apply to our lives?
- c) If your children attend a Lutheran elementary school, ask about the Bible history or religion lesson taught in school that day. You could use the same questions as in b) above. By doing so, you remind your children that the Word is important beyond the walls of the classroom and after we step out of the church doors.
- d) List other ways to make the most of your home/school/church partnership.

What other important reminders can help in the informal sharing of the promise?

HOMEwork



What is your plan for formal family devotions?

Take five minutes now and write out a brief plan for formal devotions in your home. Be sure to consider the following:

- a) How will you deal with opposition to your devotion plan?
- b) What books will you use for your devotion?
- c) What time each day will you use for your devotion?
- d) Who is going to lead the devotion?

Consider teaming up with another family in the congregation. Regularly pray for and encourage each other so you continue your formal devotions and improve them.

How is your personal Bible study going? There's nothing better than time in the Word to help you make the most of informal worship opportunities with your children.

Preview of the next session

There is a temptation for us to compartmentalize our lives. Our sinful natures want to isolate God to the margins of our lives so that our Christianity has little to do with Monday morning or Saturday night. But we do not have one life that is devoted to God, another to our work, another to our family, and still another to the pursuit of entertainment. Our whole lives are devoted to our Savior, whose whole life was devoted to us. As Christians, we want our faith in Christ to be seen in every detail of our lives. Next time, we will discuss applying our Christian faith to the details of daily life. Specifically, we will look at discipline, communication, and dealing with money and possessions.

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 501

Possible reading: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Five

Love One Another as Dearly Loved Children

Introduction

How can you tell if people are devoted (insert the name of the team of your choice) football fans?

How does that relate to the devotion Christian families show for Christ?

Today we are going to encourage one another in three specific areas in which families live their faith.

Part One: As you remember your power to love one another

Setting the scene

Paul spent the first three chapters of Ephesians painting a beautiful portrait of the bride of Christ—the holy Christian church. We have been brought from death to life by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the water of Baptism, he clothed us as his bride in the beautiful wedding garments of salvation. Now, how is that bride to live?

Ephesians 5:1,2 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Understanding the point

What does Paul mean by calling us to “be imitators of God”?

In the midst of encouragement to live our faith in everyday life, why does Paul remind us that we are “dearly loved children”?

Taking it home

Evaluate these statements: The time we have spent in this Bible study, talking about being in the Word personally and as families, could have been shortened to make more time for practical how-tos for Christian living. We really need to spend more time on the dos and don'ts of Christian living.

Part Two: As you discipline your children

Setting the scene

The book of Proverbs, from the inspired pen of King Solomon, is a marvelous book of the Bible. But to understand it correctly, we must keep its purpose in mind. It *was not* written to teach us what standards we must live up to if we *really* want to be called children of God. It *was* written to help dearly loved children of God find clear direction in putting their gospel strength to work in their lives.

Proverbs 19:18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope;
do not be a willing party to his death.

Understanding the point

According to Solomon, what is the reason a Christian parent is careful to discipline his son or daughter?

In what way would failing to discipline your child make you “a willing party to his death”? Can you think of a biblical example of just such parenting?

State Solomon's point positively. What is the ultimate goal of Christian discipline?

When can you say you have completed a certain act of discipline? Read the words from 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 (written as Paul was concluding an act of church discipline in Corinth) to help you find the answer. “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”

What further encouragement do you want to give to your children as you forgive them and assure them of your continued love? Consider these words of encouragement Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Taking it home

Evaluate this statement: “Sure, I'm a lot more lenient than my parents were. But I'm convinced that I'm doing a lot less harm than my parents did with overly strict discipline.”

Since parents can err in being either too lenient or too strict, let's make a list of warnings in both directions as we search Proverbs for more of God's wisdom.

Warnings against becoming too lenient:

Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13,14; 29:15,17

Proverbs 1:8,9; 25:11,12; 26:5; 27:5,6; 28:23

Other warnings?

Warnings against becoming too strict:

Proverbs 13:24

Proverbs 12:16,18; 14:29; 15:1; 17:27; 29:11

Proverbs 4:23; 23:15-18

Proverbs 28:13

Other warnings?

Before we go on to Part Three, take a moment to go to the HOMEwork section at the end of this session. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make in your Christian discipline. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or a with another Bible study participant.

Part Three: As you communicate with one another

Setting the scene

Children (and adults!) admire those who can train wild animals at the zoo or circus. Taming such wild animals is a special skill that requires wisdom and patience. But as the book of James reminds us, taming wild animals is nothing compared to the difficulty of taming the tongue. Let's turn to the book of James for Spirit-given wisdom and patience in taming our tongues in order to make the communication in our homes a blessing to all.

James 1:19,20 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Understanding the point

With his very first words, how does James beautifully point us back to the power and motivation for striving for Christlike communication in our homes?

How will our communication with family members (and with others) be blessed when we are “quick to listen, slow to speak”?

James also mentions being “slow to become angry.” What are the causes of our anger and the cures for our anger as we listen to others?

Causes	Cures
<i>Proverbs 18:13</i>	<i>Proverbs 18:13</i>
<i>Proverbs 20:9</i>	<i>Proverbs 20:9</i>
Other causes?	

Taking it home

One of the most challenging tasks in communicating with others is to slow ourselves down before we answer so that we can truly listen to one another without jumping to conclusions. Often our conclusions are false and defensive and lead to needless quarrels. We may have misunderstood one another. That may lead to the feeling that the other person really has not listened at all. While there are many different ways to practice listening to one another, one way is to cultivate the skill called active listening. In active listening, before you reply with your answers, ideas, or solutions, you do two things:

Step 1: Paraphrase what you believe the other is saying. Pay special attention to the emotions that are expressed or displayed. (Examples: “What I hear you saying is that . . .”; “Do you mean that . . .”; “If I understand you correctly, you are thinking that . . .”; or “Sounds like you are feeling . . .”)

Putting their thoughts into your own words does three things:

- 1) It checks to make sure you have understood them correctly, giving them a chance to clarify their point if you misunderstood.
- 2) It indicates that you have indeed been listening to them.
- 3) It allows them to clarify and better understand their own thinking and feelings by hearing their thoughts “played back” to them.

Step 2: Ask questions to get more information on what you did not understand or to get an explanation of important points.

- 1) Asking questions further expresses interest in the person and in what he or she is sharing with you.
- 2) Asking questions also allows the other to “paint” a more complete picture of what he or she is describing to you. (Proverbs 20:5: “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.”)

Warning: We need to avoid using this skill to manipulate people, rather than to show Christ-like love. (“If I act like I’m listening, maybe they will agree with me.”) We constantly need to remember that our motivation for loving communication is to listen and speak in patient love as dearly loved brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Let’s practice this skill right now. Pair up with your spouse or another member of the class. Ask the other to comment on his or her choice of one of the following topics. Practice the two steps of active listening. Before you offer any of your own thoughts or ideas about the subject, be sure that you have paraphrased what you believe the other is saying and that you have asked questions to draw out more details. Each person is allowed five minutes.

Topics for active listening:

- The one thing that scares me most about raising children in the 21st century is . . .
- The greatest blessing of our Christian faith for this life is . . .
- If I could ask God one question, it would be . . .

Before we go on to Part Four, take a moment to go to the HOMEwork section at the end of this session. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make regarding Christian communication in your home. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or another member of the class.

Part Four: As you wisely use God’s gift of wealth

Setting the scene

If there ever was a person in world history who had it all, that person was King Solomon. He was the wisest, richest, and most powerful man of his day. But his abuse of his wealth and power destroyed his faith for a time and almost cost him his eternal soul. It’s no wonder that the Spirit used him to coin the following proverb. (We in wealthy America can learn a great deal from it.)

*Proverbs 30:7-9 “Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.”*

Understanding the point

In what way can riches tempt us to “disown” our Lord?

When Solomon spoke of dishonoring God’s name by stealing, he certainly included the obvious forms of stealing that can land someone in jail. However, in what other ways might we be tempted to “steal” when times are tough? (Though these actions would be sin in God’s eyes, they probably wouldn’t concern the police at all.)

Taking it home

There is a tremendous difference between the sinful world’s attitude toward money and possessions and the attitude the Lord looks for in us. In the following chart (adapted from *Healthy Families: A Manual for Christian Family Living* produced by Fox Valley Lutheran High School), fill in the third and fourth columns, which express the worldly person’s attitude toward money and possessions and the Christian’s.

<i>God Says</i>	<i>The Issue</i>	<i>The World Says</i>	<i>The Christian Says</i>
The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it (Psalm 24:1).	Ownership		
Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights (James 1:17).	The Source of Blessings		
But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33).	The Reliability of God		
What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)	What Really Matters in Life		
For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but	Our Purpose in Life		

<i>God Says</i>	<i>The Issue</i>	<i>The World Says</i>	<i>The Christian Says</i>
<p>for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:14,15).</p> <p>Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Proverbs 3:9,10).</p>	<p>Generous Firstfruit Giving</p>		

List three specific steps Christian families can take to testify that they live by God’s view of money and possessions and not the world’s.

Go to the HOMEwork section that follows. Write down the two most important changes you feel you need to make in the way your family deals with God’s material blessings. Discuss your suggested changes with your spouse or a member of the class.

HOMEwork



With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in our Christian discipline:

- 1)
- 2)

With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in our Christian communication:

- 1)
- 2)

With the strength God supplies to his dearly loved children, we will strive to make these two improvements in the way we use our money and possessions so that it reflects our Christian faith:

1)

2)

Also, don't forget that God supplies his strength through his means of grace. Don't drop your plans for making better use of his Word in your home personally and as a family. Don't give up making the most of your opportunities to use Word and sacrament in your church family. May God bless you and make you a blessing to many. As you strive to carry out the Savior's work in your home, always remember that "your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Closing devotion

Suggested closing hymn: 500

Possible reading: Psalm 128

Share the Promise with Your Children

How to Lay the Foundation for a Strong Christian Home

Session Six

Put It to Work (Optional)

Introduction

Before lighting the charcoal briquettes for a cookout, how do you arrange them in the grill?

Why do you do that?

Part One: The importance of putting to work the things you've heard

Setting the scene

The Sermon on the Mount is one of our Savior's longest single discourses recorded in the Bible. The section below, from Matthew chapter 7, is the conclusion to that sermon. Note carefully what Jesus wanted his hearers to do with the words he preached.

Matthew 7:24-27 *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

Understanding the point

In Jesus' parable, what makes the difference between a house that stands and one that falls?

People will react to Jesus' Word in one of two ways. Describe those two ways.

Taking it home

In the parable, storms pound both houses regardless of their foundation. What truth of everyday life is Jesus teaching us with that fact?

Storms will hit us as long as we live. What advantage, then, is there for us Christians to build our homes on the rock of Jesus' words?

Part Two: How has it been going?

As you consider your personal Bible study and formal and informal sharing of the Word with your children,

- 1) what has been going well for you?
- 2) what have you found to be the greatest challenges that get in your way?
- 3) what more can your church family do to encourage your personal Bible study and formal and informal sharing of God's Word?

Part Three: A closing encouragement

Setting the scene

Ephesians is one of Paul's prison letters, written during his imprisonment in Rome. Although Paul was separated by many miles from the Christians in Ephesus, he regularly prayed for them. In Ephesians 3, Paul informs the Ephesian believers that he is praying for their spiritual growth. What a wonderful prayer this is! Our Lord wants each of us and each member of our families to pray such prayers.

Ephesians 3:14-21 For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Understanding the point

Paul asks God to give the Ephesians three blessings. Study the verses of the Ephesian passage.

For what blessings does he pray in these verses?

- 1) Verses 16 and 17

2) Verses 17 and 18

3) Verse 19

What two reasons for Paul's confidence are given in verse 20?

Taking it home

Why can we have the same confidence that God's Word will accomplish great things for us and for our families?

HOMEwork



Make specific plans outlining how you will improve (1) your personal study of the Word and (2) your formal and informal sharing of the Word with your children.

Consider again the wisdom of teaming up with another individual or family with whom you will share your plans in order to encourage one another regularly. Since the spiritual growth of our families is vitally important, let's make use of all the Christian encouragement we can find.

Closing devotion

Speak or sing together these hymn stanzas as your closing prayer:

Oh, blest the house, whate'er befall,
Where Jesus Christ is all in all!
A home that is not wholly his—
How sad and poor and dark it is!

Then here will I and mine today
A solemn promise make and say:
Though all the world forsake his Word,
I and my house will serve the Lord!

(Christian Worship 506:1,5)