

The Family¹ Table

I didn't grow up eating dinner at a table with my family. I am a child of a divorced household. So, many of my meals were eaten sitting in front of the television. Far from ideal, but it was what I thought was normal. I, of course, on occasion ate dinner with my mother and sisters. I knew of such a practice. And when we went to Grandma and Grandpa's, we ate dinner² together as a family. But by and large, I was most comfortable eating my meals watching reruns or ballgames.

The first few years of marriage was the same. My wife and I had different schedules, and often we would eat when we could. I was more than comfortable with this arrangement. During this time came the advent of "TiVo"—a device that could record shows and games to be watched later. So, meals were affairs when I could watch whatever I had previously recorded. Sometimes my wife would watch with me. Sometimes not.

Then, in the spring of 2005, my wife got pregnant. We were delighted to learn that we were going to have a daughter. And it was sometime in the summer of 2005 that my wife and I had "the talk". My wife grew up in the same house her entire childhood. Except for a brief time in college, my wife lived at home for 25 years—the same home. This was a foreign concept to me! Besides that, for nearly every evening meal, *her family ate together at a dinner table*. That was what they did. It was their practice. No television. Just conversation gathered around a meal. And now that we were going to have a child, she wanted to *quietly* and *gently* insist that we begin this same practice.³ It was important to her; it was important for our family.

And so, when we welcomed Sophia into the world in November, we started to eat dinner as a family, every night that we were together (as my schedule allowed). It didn't matter if it was a nice, home-cooked meal, or something we grabbed on the way home, or tuna fish and Kraft macaroni and cheese. *We ate at the family table*. **And it was one of the biggest changes in my life for the better**. No matter anyone's mood, or day, or disposition, we all sat at the dinner table and talked. To each other. Booster seats and highchairs. Spilled milk and dropped crumbs. But we were present for one another as a family.

Why do I tell this tale? Maybe you can guess. I know many of your habits and family lives. Many others I don't know. But I *suspect* very few families are eating together. There are some reasons for this. I have already mentioned one. The advent of TV, smart phones, tablets. We are entertained to death. We must be always watching *something*. We don't have the patience or attention span to sit and eat. Together. Another reason is the schedules of households. More and more families have **both** parents working. This makes meal planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation very difficult. Fewer and fewer people work jobs with schedules that are set or predictable. And finally, the biggest driver is YOUTH SPORTS. Ugh! It is the proverbial tail

¹ For the purposes of this article, the family can be a husband and wife, a couple with children, grandparents that are caring for children, or any combination thereof.

² What I call "dinner", some of you call "supper". What you call "dinner", I call lunch!

³ 1 Peter 3:1-2.

that wags the family dog. The encroachment of youth sports into the life of the family has been to our culture's *detriment*, especially to Christian families.⁴

But I also share this as an encouragement. Growing out of this new-found habit (insisted upon by my lovely wife) was *the instruction of my children*. It was at the dinner table that we began a nightly devotion involving my daughter.⁵ We read and prayed and sang. And discussed. It was the time when we could come together, enjoy one another's fellowship, and reflect on the blessings from our Lord. I admit, this took shape slowly, over time. But the more we did it consistently, the easier it was for us to do. Even meal planning and shopping was helped, because *we had the common goal of sitting down together* (and not at 8:30!).

Family devotions can take many forms and happen many ways.⁶ But I am convinced that we are missing an opportunity to inculcate even the *broader behavior* of eating together for future generations. What do we want our children's families to look like? Act like? How are they going to hand down practices that we don't give them? In part I share my own story to let you know I know the struggle. I know the temptations. I know the feeling of panic of running into the grocery store on some dark February night with no clue what's for dinner and spending more money than was in the budget because I was starving to death! But at some point we have to have the common goal of slowing down, putting away our technology, and actually looking across the table at our loved ones and having a conversation. And if that means that Avery can't be enrolled in soccer, cheerleading AND karate...well so be it.

So, what are some best practices? What are some ways to start *to try to attempt* to eat dinner together?⁷ First, **set a time that most often most people will be able to eat together**. Sounds simple, because it is. But hard to stick to! Our family's dinner time is 6:30. While not set in stone, it is set in very hard concrete. At the very least, it creates a fixed point to deviate from if needed. Second, **try to have at least three menu items a week that you shop for and know how to prepare**. In other words, don't wait until before dinner to buy dinner! But give yourself some flexibility. Make other nights "pizza night" or "left-over night" to alleviate some of the stress. Third, **no devices at the dinner table**—this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Finally, once you establish a pattern, it is easier to have those "exceptional" nights when you deviate from the norm. But you must set the pattern! You must decide to make the commitment. If it's important (and it is), then you and your family have some decisions to make with regards to time, activities, planning, etc. You can also make it fun! Let the kids have some input in meal planning and the older ones take turns preparing. Share the load with our spouse. Do things that

⁴ And don't even get me started on youth sports on Sundays!

⁵ My next newsletter article will discuss how to do a family devotion at the table.

⁶ Ibid.!

⁷ Folks, I may not be good at many things (you are all well aware by now of my many failings), but one thing I am good at is organization and time management. You might want to pay attention!

create micro-routines. Light candles, listen to music,⁸ learn some new table prayers. Have assigned seating (yes, I think assigned seating is fun).

Look. I am your pastor. I care about you and your families. This is something that will strengthen and bless us in so many ways. We must push back against the tide of a culture that is *consumed with consumption, entertainment, and self-gratification*. Eating together creates and fosters sharing, sacrifice, and communication. It can also be the foundation for a healthy prayer and devotional life.⁹ I know that no one reads these articles. I am well aware of it. But if there is **one person** who takes what I say to heart, then it was worth it. Finally, I appeal to a higher authority. Read the Gospel of Luke and count how many times Jesus eats with people. It's a lot.

⁸ We call this *Tafel Musik* (German for “table music”) at my house. Many times it's Bach!

⁹ Again, next month!