

Family and Worship

by Valsan Thampu

The sermon emphasizes the critical role of family worship in fostering cohesion, love, and accountability within the family unit.

Scripture: Psalm 95:6, Psalm 133:1, Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 18:20, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Ephesians 5:25, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 10:24, James 1:22, 1 John 4:20

Topics: "Family Worship", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

Valsan Thampu emphasizes the neglected practice of family worship in today's urban context, highlighting how the secular privatization of religion has marginalized faith in personal and family life due to busyness and self-absorption. He stresses the importance of family worship in shaping family culture, promoting cohesion, and creating a stable foundation for belonging. Thampu explains how worship enhances family coherence by fostering self-transcendence, other-orientation, reciprocity, and love, emphasizing the need for a spiritual revolution from self-centeredness to God-centeredness for family cohesion to endure.

Transcript

Family worship is grossly neglected today. In the scattered and divided life that we lead, especially in the urban context, worship at home is the first casualty and God is crowded out of our personal and family life. Unless forced by situations of desperation or crisis, we rarely turn to God. The secular privatization of religion now marginalizes our faith not only vis-à-vis the public space but also the family space, not because we are hostile to God but because we are too busy and self-absorbed as individuals to come together and spend time with God and with each other. Some of us regard church attendance on Sundays, perhaps, as penance and expiation for the willful neglect of godliness on weekdays.

We need to reckon the spiritual logic that underlies family worship and its role in shaping family culture and in promoting family cohesion. On the practical plane what family worship does, without our knowing or aiming at it, is to create a stable foundation for the discipline of belonging. The belief that a family is founded on God and that it is, therefore, much more than an accidental aggregation of individuals acts powerfully as an integrating influence on the family. This creates the matrix for what all the members of that family can hold together as a shared culture and identity, from where they also derive their norms of morality, self-worth, dignity and humanity.

This kind of unity or cohesion is an ongoing, subconscious and dynamic reality; perhaps like the internal unity (shalom) of the body as effected by the circulation of blood. Every part of the body, including the

extremities, is linked to each other through the blood stream that washes and nourishes the body as a whole. When the flow of blood to a part of the body stops, that part's relationship with the rest of the body is imperiled, resulting in acute pain. Because this cohesion works steadily and silently as an inner dynamic without any fanfare, we tend to take it for granted. Just as the flowering and fruiting of a tree depend on the invisible and silent flow of sap in its trunk and branches, the health and felicity of a family depend very substantially on its worship life.

How does worship life enhance the coherence of family life? It does so, in the first place, by facilitating an outward flow from the self towards the other members of the family. Praying together is an implicit affirmation of the organic oneness of the family. Each member is a limb, an integral part,. Coherence in the context of life has to be kinetic in nature. It has to be a coherence of movement, and not a static co-existence. As long as the individuals who comprise a family remain self-enclosed, unmindful of the presence and needs of the other members, it does not become a family even though they live together under the same roof, eat the same food, and attend the same church. The discipline of worship enables individuals to grow out of their exclusive self-absorption and become integrated as a family. That is because worship involves self-transcendence: an experience of rising above the self. When we pray, we become focused on God, which is a pre-condition for becoming sensitive to others. We cannot read the Bible, or any religious scripture, in the right spirit and still remain self-opinionated and self-preoccupied.

The dynamic of unregenerate human nature operates almost wholly in terms of unilateral receiving. We want to receive love and attention. We want to be served, understood, affirmed, and cherished. But we forget all too easily that others around us also have similar needs. What the discipline of worship does is to create a balance between the self and others, based on the equality of worth that God ascribes to all human beings. In this process the essence of receiving itself is transformed. Receiving in the worldly and individualistic model is a matter of right. So children tend to believe that they have a right to be loved, financed, and made much of. In a spiritual sense, we have a need to receive from two sources: God and each other. That is because no one is complete in himself or herself. But, in the human context, the need to receive can never be separated from the need to give. Those who will not give cannot also receive. This simple truth is not all that obvious to the eyes of the worldly; for the operative logic of the world is that of unilateralism, which sees relationship as a one-way traffic. Worship creates the inward logic for human mutuality by reinforcing our other-orientation: our sensitivity and response-ability towards those around us. It is for this reason that the Bible emphasizes that our love for God necessarily involves our love for our fellow human beings. If we claim, as John argues in the epistle, that we love the God we cannot see, but not love the sisters and brothers we do see, then we are liars indeed.

Love is the life-blood of the integrative role that worship plays in family and social life. It is worrisome how increasingly we tend to forget that the very purpose of worship is to enlarge the horizon of our love. Worship is communion -a relationship of deep oneness and intimacy- with God. This enables us to become more and more like God. God is love. That being the case, how can we worship God 'in Spirit and truth' without broadening our human sympathies and enlarging our capacity to love? And how can we become one, unless nurtured in love which holds us together, unfailingly? Worship needs to be seen as the school of love, just as suffering is the school of wisdom. But worship is a pre-condition for suffering to yield wisdom. Worship makes us positive to suffering and so enables us to bring out the blessings disguised in it.

Love, in practical terms, is reciprocity. Reciprocity is the logic of cohesion. Put in the words of Jesus, we are to treat others as we like to be treated by them. The native tendency in human nature is to upset this

balance and to take everyone and everything on one's own terms. Sin corrupts reciprocity into unilateralism, which is the principle of alienation and exploitation. Reciprocity is the essence of the spiritual culture; whereas unilateralism is the pattern of the world. It yields estrangement, cruelty and violence. Shifting human conduct from the foundation of self-centredness (unilateralism) to that of God-centredness (reciprocity) is the spiritual revolution underlying the ministry of Jesus. Family cohesion, if it is to endure at all, has to rest on this inward transformation that needs to be consolidated through worship as an on-going process.

Worship as togetherness:

In the rushed and scattered lives that we lead, we forfeit the leisure to care and share. In several homes, the family as a whole does not share even meals. In extreme cases, a home becomes, as an American poet puts it, "a place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in." In olden days meals, in the family context, have had not only nutritive but also ritualistic value: the ritual of togetherness and sharing. It is this that Jesus affirmed through the Last Supper he celebrated with the disciples. Today meals are associated only with eating and not sharing, except in respect of ceremonial occasions like weddings, birth anniversaries and so on. In such a state it is all the more important to adhere to the family worship time where the entire family comes together with Jesus as the invisible host. Worship is not only an experience of being with God, but also of being with each other. This should be seen as basic to family life; for family is a nuclear community. Sharing is the life-blood of a community. A community decays when its shared life declines. This is obvious, for example, in terms of the difference between doing a course of study as a regular member of a college (an academic community) and doing the same course by correspondence, which excludes community from the experience of learning.

This sense of togetherness is the foundation for our capacity for relationships. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the wake of the nuclear families, in the urban and individualistic culture, there has been a decline in relational skills. Relationships can deepen only if they are continually nourished in togetherness. The biblical view of life lays a lot of emphasis on forming and sustaining healthy and just relationships. This is envisaged to have a direct bearing on our worship life. Jesus insists that no worship should be offered to God unless one's relationships are preserved in their righteousness (Mtt. 5: 23-24). If a person brings an offering to the altar and there remembers that his brother has some thing against him, he should go back and be reconciled to him. Only then does he become eligible to make an offering to God. It is a matter of familiar experience that when person's relationship with others, especially the members of his family, turns sour he finds it difficult, even impossible, to communicate not only with the person he is estranged from, but also with God.

The worship life of a family depends very substantially on the quality of its inter-personal relationships. That is because togetherness as a consistent principle of life is the essence of worship. We cannot be alienated from our fellow human beings, and remain close to God. Conversely, our communion with God obliges and empowers us to be good stewards of our relationships. Worship involves a two-fold relationship: with God and with one another. This is also the basic discipline, the spiritual pattern, of all our relationships.

A corollary to this truth is that our attitude to worship becomes a mirror that captures the truth of our predicament at any given point in time. The great preacher, D. L. Moody, believed that either the Bible will hold us back from sins, or our sins will hold us back from the Bible. Sin tends to separate individuals from their intimate communities and relationships; for alienation is the very logic of sin. Sanctity, in contrast,

reinforces the joyful intimacy of family relationships. Those who get sucked into the vortex of the sin-induced preference for secrecy and loneliness find the prospect of worship burdensome and unwelcome. Ironically, the experience of worship is what they need most. In a practical sense, the best index to the robustness of family life is the enthusiasm for family worship that prevails in it. The 'sanctity graph,' so to speak, of a family operates on the coordinates of togetherness and worship life.

As a matter of fact, togetherness becomes a blessing only when enjoyed in sanctity. If something is impure or mean, it is desirable to keep a distance from it, unless one has the spiritual strength to respond redemptively to it. If, on the contrary, something is good and positive, it is useful to be intimate with it. Our communion with God is a supreme value because God is the source of all that is good and positive. But once we cut ourselves off from this source of nourishment, renewal and inner hygiene, we begin to be alienated and scattered even as we live together. Togetherness ceases to be a positive and dynamic experience, even if it does not provoke overt violence and hate. Alienation from God weakens the foundation for sharing and family solidarity. Immorality, alcoholism and drug-addiction necessarily undermine the cohesion of a family. It is impractical to assume that we can resist these pressures on our own strength. Our fortification against them happens as a byproduct of our abiding in God. In the words of the Psalmist, God is our refuge also in the sense that our love for him protects us against anti-life forces.

Not many people realize that family worship has an implicit counseling function that is all the more effective for being indirect. Worship involves the routine awareness of the eternal truths and principles on which our sanity and well-being depend. Affirmed through the medium of worship, these principles penetrate our mind deeper, encountering the least possible resistance. In contrast, they could be contested or resisted when stated either as reprimand or as counseling. Through family prayer the members of a family come to share a set of common values and concerns. What is said in prayer is on behalf of all the members, and they endorse these concerns and commitments by saying 'amen' to the prayer.

Worship, if practised according to its discipline, nurtures a contemplative spirit in us. Life at the present time is impoverished on account of the polarization between action and contemplation. A symptom of this disease is that many think of work and worship as alternatives. It is either work or worship. Those of this persuasion often quote the aphorism 'to work is to pray' to justify their stand. In point of fact the practical truth of this saying is that work and worship are inseparable, and not alternatives to choose from. The erosion of the contemplative aspect of our life has not worked to the advantage of our humanity. So even as the physical world takes rapid strides forward, individuals continue to dwindle in their stature. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., today we have guided missiles and misguided men. Moral dwarfs who boast of gigantic material achievements people our world. The human element suffers on account of the imbalance between the active and the contemplative. Worship -i.e. relating to God in personal depth- is a profoundly enriching thing for our inner life. It activates, fortifies and replenishes our inner resources. The exclusive preoccupation with our physical life is a symptom of bankruptcy. A pointer to this is the otherwise inexplicable restlessness that underlies our active life.

Given the importance of worship in family life, the need to make it a meaningful and transformative experience cannot be exaggerated. Approached either as mere routine or as a magical activity, the spiritually and intellectually formative aspects of family worship may not be recognized or experienced. Worship should not be seen as something isolated from the general flavour of the life we lead. It must be enjoyed as the resource for reforming and rejuvenating our life. The fullness of our personality and involvement must be brought to bear on it. The Bible must be read not as paying lip-service to a religious

custom. The Word must become the lantern to our feet and the light to our path, as it is meant to be. In a real sense, it must become an opportunity to seek the will of God and to listen to Him. The family assembled together at prayer must symbolize its God-centredness. There must be time for self-examination as well as seeking direction from above. Family worship must be an exercise in truth, hiding nothing from the eyes of the all-seeing God. The transformative power of family worship depends to a large extent on our willingness to accept the holiness of God as the shaping force of our family culture and personal life.

A disciplined approach to family worship also makes for a systematic and planned approach to our daily life. Worship sharpens our sense of accountability to God and to one another. This minimizes the inclination to be lazy, haphazard or erratic in our ways. God does not condone disorder, inconsistency, laziness or apathy. It is impossible to worship God in Spirit and in truth and yet live according to our arbitrary instincts and tastes. From worship life we derive the motivation as well as the energy to lead a godly and noble life. Worship is, indeed, a catalyst for fullness of life. This includes, among other things, a keenness to prepare ourselves prayerfully and practically for each day's responsibilities and opportunities. If we really worship God, as Jesus said we should, we cannot sidestep our duty to be 'perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect' (Mtt. 5:48). Family worship that has no bearing on our daily life does not amount to true worship.

Yet another practical benefit from worship is the cultivation of the spirit of thanksgiving. When we are in the presence of God there are two things about which we become particularly sensitive: (a) all that we are and all that we have point to the goodness and generosity of God and (b) they far exceed what we deserve. This awakens a sense of gratitude. The ungodly, in contrast, are given to grumbling, even in the midst of the blessings of life. Worship is a sacrament of profound gratitude. Gratitude implies a positive orientation. Grumbling is, in contrast, the litany of negativity. Through regular worship, this becomes a stable attribute of the worshipper's outlook. On account of this spirit of gratitude, the believer becomes positive in his approach to life and motivated to enter fully into the possibilities of the given context. The disgruntled succumb to negativity and become blind to the goodness and glory within their reach.

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