

**"Fiddler on the Roof"**  
**1 Corinthians 11:23-30**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today is Father's Day and so I'm going to preach about the family. I can't think of a timelier topic. In the opening scene of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character, Tevye, talks about people's families and lives being as shaky as "a fiddler on the roof." That does accurately describe millions of American families today. They're as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.

But they don't have to be. Parents, especially Christian parents, can make their families stable and strong and you can see how, by implication, in the passage I read, 1 Corinthians 11:23-30.

**COMMUNION AS RITUAL**

This passage is about what we call "The Lord's Supper" or "communion." Communion is a highly significant activity in the life of Christians and the church. That's because it is three things.

First, it is an ordinance. An ordinance is essentially an object lesson. One thing stands for or represents another thing. Verses 23-24 reveal what the bread stands for. It stands for the body of Jesus and breaking it stands for the breaking of that body. He was tortured and crucified. Verse 25 reveals what the cup stands for. It stands for His blood that was shed as he was tortured and crucified.

Notice the words "which is for you" in verse 24. The body of Jesus was broken and His blood was shed for us. It was part of the price that He Himself paid for our sins. It, along with His perfect life, resurrection, and ascension, is the basis of our salvation. Communion is an ordinance.

But it isn't just an ordinance. It's also a sacrament. Verses 27-29 imply that. There is something so sacred about it that participating in it unworthily brings judgment on us. It actually diminishes our person and life when we do.

What makes it so sacred is that it's a sacrament or means of grace. It's something tangible in the material world that God uses to bless us.

He is able to use the act of communion to convey His presence and power to us. I've talked with followers of His who have had deeply spiritual experiences, unusual manifestations of His presence, while taking it. I know one who was even healed of a physical disease while taking it. That's because it's a sacrament.

But it isn't just an ordinance and a sacrament. It's a ritual as well. You know what a ritual is. It's something that is done regularly and in the same way. Communion is just that isn't it? It's a ritual that Jesus' followers have been practicing for the past 2000 years.

And what an effective one it has been. Did you ever wonder why Jesus commanded us to do it and to do it regularly and in the same way? He Himself tells us in the last line in verse 25. It's to help us remember His death until He comes again. He knew that if His followers didn't ritualistically celebrate the Lord's Supper, they would probably forget or at least ignore what His death was all about. He knew that repeating this ritual frequently would keep His substitutionary death central in the minds and hearts of His followers. And obviously, it has.

## **THE POWER OF RITUAL**

Now, that illustrates a fundamental truth of our existence that all of us need to know. That truth is the power of ritual.

Emile Durkheim was a celebrated French sociologist. He taught that ritual is essential to the maintenance and health of any social institution or group. He contended that it does the following four things: (1) enhances the group's solidarity; (2) builds loyalty to the group's values; (3) communicates the group's values to new members; and (4) creates a euphoric sense of well-being for the group's members. Durkheim was right. Ritual is powerful and does do all four of those things.

The Muslim and Jewish communities, both of which are highly ritualistic, are classic examples of this. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye explains what it is that makes Jews Jewish. It's ritual. No ethnic group has more ritual and, as a result, more loyalty than Jews do.

When Tony Campolo taught at the University of Pennsylvania, a large number of his students were Jewish. And when the time of Seder, which was holy days, approached, many of them asked him to excuse them from his class. Some of those, as many Jews are, were atheists. So he pointed out to them the inconsistency of atheists asking off for religious holidays. They became angry though when he did and declared, ***“We may be atheists, but we’re still Jewish.”***

That is such a revealing statement. It illustrates, like communion does, the power of ritual.

### **THE POWER OF RITUAL IN THE HOME**

Now, what ritual does in other institutions, communities, and groups it can and will do in the home. Yes, it’s true. Many of our families are like a fiddler on the rood, shaky and weak. But ritual can help make them stable and strong. Studies show that ritualistic families have proportionately fewer juvenile delinquents and more psychologically healthy children than non-ritualistic families do. Going back to Durkheim again, ritual does three positive things in the home.

First, it enhances the solidarity of the family. It binds its members to it. Ritual makes Jews feel an affinity with other Jews and that’s what it does in the home. It makes family members feel an affinity with other family members. One sociologist says it this way, ***“Children from highly ritualistic homes have an intense longing to identify with their families.”*** Ritual creates cohesiveness in the home.

There’s a second thing that it does. It creates a sense of well-being and joy in family members. Parents ask, ***“How can I help my children overcome their insecurities.”*** The answer is ***“ritual.”*** They ask, ***“How can I help my children feel good about themselves?”*** The answer is ***“ritual.”*** Maybe your child has a bad day at school. Maybe a teacher scolds him or a bully beats him up or a friend betrays him. Then he comes home and experiences a family ritual, like your bed time routine with him at night. The ritual assures him that his life and he are still

okay and helps him put his shattered world back together again.

Ritual does a third thing. It helps build loyalty to family values and beliefs. It has a latent effect on children. It makes them sub-consciously want to value and believe the things that their family values and believes. That in turn leads them to find pleasure in doing so.

I say all of that to say this. Ritual is one of the best resources parents have to make their families healthy and strong.

### **CREATING RITUALS IN THE HOME**

So, create rituals in your home. When I say rituals, I mean activities that are done regularly and in the same way and that enhance the person and life of those who do them.

For instance, every Saturday evening when I was a little boy, my mother got me ready for church the next day. At 7:00 p.m., and it was always 7:00 p.m., she gave me a bath or as I grew older I gave myself one. She and I then laid out the clothes I would wear the next morning to church. We were poor and I normally dressed like a ragamuffin but not to go to church. I had good clothes for that and my mother laid them out for me. After that, she took my one pair of black dress shoes and polished them with me there or later was with me as I polished them.

She and I did that every Saturday evening in the very same way for years. It was a ritual in other words and had a profound impact on me. For one thing, it drew me close to my mother. For another thing, it impressed upon me the importance of Sunday morning worship, an impression I still have today. I wear a suit every Sunday morning but it isn't primarily because I'm the preacher. Many preachers don't even wear them anymore. It's primarily because of what that ritual instilled in me.

And you know what else? I think of that ritual almost every Sunday morning when I put my black dress shoes on. I think of my mother getting me ready for church and feel the same feelings I felt then. Which shows us a fourth thing that ritual does. It renews the past. It makes what happened a long time ago present in our current consciousness.

Anyway that illustrates what rituals are. They're activities that are done regularly and in the same way and that enhance the person and life of those who do them.

It also illustrates what parents should do - create such activities in their homes. I would challenge you to be creative in doing that. Use your imagination and come up with ideas that are fresh and new. You can create rituals for eating, dressing, vacationing, celebrating holidays, celebrating birthdays, going to church, going to bed, opening presents, keeping the Sabbath Day, and much more.

Someone was reminiscing about his childhoods and told me about his family dinner. They had it every day of the week, except Sunday, at 5:30 sharp, at the dining room table, and with their mother's best dishware. They not only had dinner but conversation as well. They went around the table and each had to share the best thing that happened to him or her that day. It was a time for talking, laughing, and loving. He looks back on that ritual now as one of the most meaningful experiences of his life.

So, do it. Create rituals in your home.

## **FAMILY ALTAR**

The most significant of those of course is the family altar. "The family altar" refers to family members gathering together ritualistically to read the Bible and pray. I say ritualistically because it needs to be done regularly and in the same way. What that way is of course is up to you. Be creative, taking your own family's personalities, circumstances, and needs into account in developing it.

However you do it, you need to do it. Listen to what our own denomination's discipline says about that: ***"We believe that families within our fellowship should set apart each day a time for collective prayer, Bible reading, and praise."*** We should make the family altar a ritual in other words and a daily one at that.

It's an incredibly effective thing when we do - probably more so than most of us realize. Referring to a well-worn axiom, a university

professor, an atheist, says this: ***“The family that prays together stays together, even if there is no God.”*** Do you get what he’s saying? The family altar, simply because it’s a ritual, dramatically and positively impacts the family. But we know that there is a God, which makes it doubly effective. Not only does something natural happen, what the professor refers to, but something supernatural does too. The family altar, I believe, is a sacrament or means of grace just like communion is.

Comment [bjm1]:

That’s why parents should have it even if their children don’t like it. Parents often quit having it because their children seem bored and don’t participate or even act up. But that doesn’t matter. People don’t have to like a ritual for it to have a positive spiritual and psychological effect on them.

One young man testifies, for instance, that He follows Jesus as an adult primarily because of the family altar as a child. And he acted up and frustrated his parents almost every time, he says.

Parents may see what’s going on outwardly but they don’t see what’s going on inwardly. Their ritual is building loyalty and commitment to Christian values even if their children’s attitudes don’t seem right.

## CONCLUSION

A poem expresses it far better than I can. It’s titled *Family Altar Fragrance* and goes like this in closing: ***“How far the holy fragrance – of the family altar goes. When childhood days are far behind - the beauty of it glows. \*\* Though some things to my memory – are indistinct and blurred, I can still hear my father’s voice – expound the Holy Word. \*\* I did not heed its counsel then – nor realize its great worth, But now I know that shrine to be – the sweetest place on earth. \*\* It proved a shield to my faith – undimmed through joy and care. The memory of that hallowed place – my father’s voice in prayer.”*** Parents, devote your selves to Jesus and create rituals in your home, especially a family altar. Your family won’t be like a fiddler on the roof if you do.