

The Family Meal

By Clark Blanchard

- ◆ *Does the Bible command a regular family meal?*
- ◆ *Is there demonstrable value to having a family meal?*

The value of a closely bonded family can scarcely be overstated. A century ago in agricultural America, the family bond was much more easily achieved. The family spent large blocks of time together working and socializing in a close-knit environment. Most daughters helped their mothers run the household, and sons worked the farm with their fathers. Limitations in transportation and communication greatly restricted outside influences.

But, of course, those days are gone. In half the American households, both parents hold jobs outside the home. Young children are often placed in daycare agencies and the school systems become the center of their lives after age five. Peers, sports, and other extracurricular activities tend to dominate schedules, and parents become chauffeurs and facilitators.

A very profitable objective is to establish a regular time when the entire family can be together in a positive and constructive setting.

The dinner table is one of the most ideal settings available in which to communicate and bond, and to create family traditions that will last a lifetime.

Biblical Examples

The act of eating together is a major theme that is repeated over and over in Scripture. It is almost always associated with communication, bonding, and a positive experience.

- In Genesis 18, God appeared to Abraham as a man with two companions. Abraham prepared a meal for them (Genesis 18:1-18).
- When the two angels proceeded down to Sodom to visit Lot, Lot prepared a meal for them (Genesis 19:1-3).
- When Abraham's servant went to acquire Rebekah for Isaac, Rebekah's family provided a meal for them to enjoy together (Genesis 24:54).
- When Jacob and Laban parted company, they sealed their agreement by having a meal together (Genesis 31:54).
- When Joseph was testing the character of his brothers in Egypt, he held a meal for them in his personal residence (Genesis 34:32).
- When Moses' father-in-law Jethro learned of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, he celebrated with a burnt offering and gifts for God and a meal for Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel (Exodus 18:12).
- One of the five Levitical offerings given to Moses was the Peace Offering. It was a ritual meal in which the priests, the offerer, and Jehovah were each given a part of the offering to consume at the Tabernacle or Temple (Leviticus 3:7:11-34).
- The holy days for the nation of Israel, that were given to Moses in the Law, were actually feasts of celebration and memorial. They were all meals eaten by the Israelite families (Deuteronomy 16:9-17).
- When Boaz wanted to show kindness to Ruth, he invited her to eat a meal with him (Ruth 2:14).
- When King David wanted to show kindness to the descendants of Jonathan, he invited Jonathan's crippled son Miphibosheth to dine with him at the king's table on a permanent basis (2 Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13).
- Jesus' most intimate time with His disciples was a meal—the Last Passover (Luke 22:7-23). At this meal, Christ instituted a new meal that will be celebrated until He comes again. It is a meal of common union—Communion (1 Corinthians 11:20-28).

- After Christ's resurrection, He made Himself known to two disciples not while they were walking along together but during the meal at Emmaus that followed (Luke 24:30-31).
- One of the most marvelous times for the disciples was when the resurrected Christ prepared breakfast for them at the Sea of Galilee (John 21:12-14).

These are just a few of the biblical examples. There are many more.

The Nature of Eating Together

There is clearly something about being human that makes eating together very special.

- It's a time when we share in meeting a common need.
- It's usually a pleasant experience—good food.
- We sit much closer than normal, yet it's acceptable and expected.
- We usually face each other.
- We each have something to do, yet it doesn't require much concentration, so talking is easy and natural.
- It's okay to abruptly change subjects, so each can share about his or her day easily.
- Normally, we wait so as to begin together and wait again until the last one is finished, so there is a sense of courtesy and respect toward one another.
- Most often, someone provides the food, so there is a sense of giving, receiving, blessing, and appreciation.

Interestingly, the business world has long been aware of the value of eating together in a wide variety of relationships, such as with customers, during interviews, with team members, at review time, for special recognition, and at retirement.

Practical Suggestions

Here are some suggestions for making the evening meal a time of family bonding and mutual enjoyment:

- Both mom and dad must be in firm agreement that this is something they want for the family enough to work together continuously to make it happen.
- In most cases, try to make it the evening supper time meal. Everyone must have supper sometime and some place. Make it a regular event at an agreed upon time on a regular basis, with few exceptions. However, avoid being legalistic. Avoid the "all-or-nothing" approach. Once a week is better than rarely or never. Be first about having the meal together but flexible with the details.
- Manage the technologies. Have the answering machine collect all calls without disrupting the meal. Turn off the TV, Palm Pilots, pagers, and any other gadget that could interrupt or distract.
- Let it be known that normally the children's friends should wait at their own home, not with their nose pressed against your screen door. However, occasionally let the kids invite a friend as a special treat.
- Teach thankfulness by letting each member share what he or she is thankful for today.
- Make preparation and clean-up of the meal part of the tradition by learning service to the family and a right attitude about the primary provided of the meal, usually mom. Dad should set the standard here, as everywhere.
- Have everyone wait to eat until everyone is present and a prayer of thanks has been given (John 6:11, 23). Have everyone remain at the table until the last one is finished eating and a parent excuses everyone.
- Promote warm communication and sharing at the meal. Let each one voluntarily tell about his or her day. Under no circumstance use this time for investigating, judging, or sentencing misbehavior. Do that before or after the meal. Keep the meal a positive time.
- Use this time to announce and discuss good things, such as a special trip, vacation, party, new purchase, new baby, or grandma's upcoming visit.
- Use this time in a non-legalistic natural way to discuss the application of biblical principles to your every day lives in such things as the choice of friend, movies, TV programs, use of money, use of time, special problems encountered today at school and any others.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Does the Bible command a regular family meal?*

A: No. But biblical examples and wisdom abound. For example, at the very formation of the nation of Israel, God instituted the Passover meal that is celebrated by Jewish families to this very day (Exodus 12:1-28). Notice that the Passover was a family meal to be celebrated by each household.

Q: *Is there demonstrable value to having a family meal?*

A: Clearly, values were better when the family had meals together. Even the world is recognizing that value. For example, Joseph Califano, President of the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse, stated that their studies show that regular family meals together did more to keep kids out of drugs and alcohol than any other single factor, even more than church, synagogue, or mosque involvement [O'Reilly Factor, FOX Cable, December 29, 2000].