

This gem of a book is what I want to give to absolutely every family I know. Intentional, formational, biblical, with profound generational—and eternal—ramifications, Earley hands us transformational hope for every single family with these practical and gospel-saturated pages. I couldn't put it down.

—ANN VOSKAMP, mother of seven, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Broken Way*

If you've never considered how a liturgy could include children bouncing on their beds or cooling down after a meltdown or passing the pepper around the dinner table (and I never had), this book could help you change the habits of your home. It never nags, scolds, guilts, or mandates. Instead, Justin Earley suggests ways that people like you and me—people with piled-up dishes and maddening soccer schedules and too little confidence that we know what we're doing—can build habits to equip our families for the lifelong pilgrimage toward Home.

—RUSSELL MOORE, *Christianity Today*

Parents need this book! Rhythms are paramount in our families, and Justin offers insights on how practicing them at home displays Jesus to our children in ways words alone cannot.

—REBEKAH LYONS, bestselling author,  
*Rhythms of Renewal* and *You Are Free*

The family is God's primary discipleship plan. It is in our households that we are taught what is most important and least important and we begin to understand how we fit in this big and scary world. In *Habits of the Household*, Justin Whitmel Earley gives us a template for household habits that root our families in the deepest realities of the gospel of Jesus Christ and form all of us more into his image. There is no formation without repetition, so I pray this book encourages your heart and emboldens your desire to allow the Spirit to flow into and through these ten everyday occurrences with greater purpose and intentionality.

—MATT CHANDLER, lead pastor, The Village Church

If you are a parent, or about to be one, or a friend of one, or a parent of one, this is gold. Sheer, honest, hilarious, helpful family-shaping gold. There is nothing easy about this most vulnerable of human vocations, and the habits in this book will not make it easy. But they will make it so much better.

—ANDY CROUCH, author, *The Tech-Wise Family*

I got no farther than the introduction and was already implementing these practices with my kids! Such a thoughtful, practical, humble, yet hilarious look at pulling out the sacred in the everyday chaos of parenting. These practices will become staples in our home.

—JOSHUA STRAUB, PhD, *Famous at Home*

Through the last nineteen years of parenting, I've viewed parenting books with a mix of fear and loathing. It seems like "experts" were quick to tell me what I was doing wrong and to offer quick-fix solutions that felt removed from my actual messy, relentless, inconsistent experience as a parent. That's why reading Justin's *Habits of the Household* was such a refreshing, inspiring experience. Justin has managed to boil down the complex world of parenting into a series of relevant, grace-filled, realistic habits that will change the formation of your family. I found myself creating a mental list of every young parent I couldn't wait to gift this book. A must-read for every parent longing to bring more meaning to their daily life.

—NICOLE UNICE, pastor, leadership consultant, and author of *The Miracle Moment: How Tough Conversations Can Actually Transform Your Most Important Relationships*

What a timely and helpful resource! I only wish I had read this when my children were still at home. In *Habits of the Household*, Justin helps us consider our normal and ordinary lives, and how powerfully formative simple practices can be. This is not a how-to book but rather a

grace-filled approach to life at home that helps us see habituation as freeing and fruitful. I can't wait to buy a box and give copies to parents.

—KEITH NIX, Veritas School, Richmond, VA; national leader in classical Christian education renewal movement

I met Justin Earley fifteen years ago; we were fresh out of college serving together as missionaries overseas. Even then, I could tell he had wisdom beyond his years. And ever since, I have been encouraged to watch him develop his voice for the benefit of Christ's people. It's no secret that home life can be chaotic—many of us are in its throes now, settling for survival mode as we simply try to make it through the day. We want to form our kids with Christian virtue, but sometimes the fight can feel futile. *Habits of the Household* will help you implement rhythms that will bring order to the mess and grace in the stress.

—MATT SMETHURST, planting pastor, River City Baptist Church, Richmond, VA; managing editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Deacons* and *Before You Open Your Bible*



# HABITS OF THE HOUSEHOLD



JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLEY



# HABITS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

PRACTICING THE STORY OF GOD  
IN EVERYDAY FAMILY RHYTHMS

 ZONDERVAN  
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*Habits of the Household*

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ISBN 978-0-310-36293-7 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-36296-8 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-36294-4 (ebook)

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Published in association with Don Gates of the literary agency The Gates Group, [www.the-gates-group.com](http://www.the-gates-group.com).

*Cover design: Micah Kandros*

*Cover illustrations: Shutterstock*

*Author photo: James Lee*

*Interior design: Denise Froehlich*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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21 22 23 24 25 /LSC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Whit, Asher, Coulter, and Shep*

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*“Because it is easier to raise strong children  
than to repair broken men and women”*



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## FOREWORD

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**W**e all face a constant challenge to be present in the moment. At any given time, it's easy for our thoughts to be all over the place—thinking about a pending task, mulling over an email we received, or even daydreaming about being somewhere other than where we are. Truly being present in the moment is important, but often elusive—even in our parenting. We often complete the tasks of family life on autopilot while our minds wander.

Have you ever gotten to the end of a busy day and realized that you were essentially dragged through it by the demands you live under? What about the challenge of organizing your family's day around God's Word? Or navigating technology with your kids? The electronic distractions that we grew up with pale in comparison with the leviathan of social media!

Whether it's our divided attention, the chaotic pace of any given day, or the challenges of technology, the longer we live in unhealthy patterns, the more normal they can seem. But in our more sober reflective moments, we realize that something needs to change. The question is what? And how?

With nineteen years of parenting six boys under our belts, Ruth and I have learned many lessons about organizing home life. In all we do, we work to keep Christ and the gospel at the center of our focus. We've found that discipling our boys doesn't

## FOREWORD

happen at a specific time each day; rather it has become the framework we use throughout the entire day. Discipling happens in the context of the habits we form and the rhythms we keep.

So just like Moses commanded the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6, we try to talk about the Word of God all day long, encouraging one another to walk by it. If you share a meal with us, you'll likely hear our boys pray, "May all we say and do bring honor and glory to you." Though my heart swells when I hear them pray those words, I also know it won't be long before someone loses patience and speaks an unkind word—such is the way of every day in the Simons household.

In the midst of everyday challenges—big and small—Ruth and I are so thankful for the wisdom that Justin shares in this book. He reminds us that habits and rhythms have power, and helps tackle the questions surrounding intentional living and parenting. If you feel like life is moving at a frenetic pace and you're struggling to keep your own heart centered, let alone your family's, this book is strong medicine. In straightforward and candid fashion, Justin breaks down the activities of a day, giving wise instruction for how to reclaim the time we're losing for maximum gospel impact in our homes.

Regardless of where you are when you start this book, be encouraged that it *is* possible to establish new rhythms, even today—because God isn't through with us yet.

—RUTH CHOU SIMONS AND TROY SIMONS,  
bestselling authors of *Foundations: Twelve  
Biblical Truths to Shape a Family*



# INTRODUCTION



## REIMAGINING HOUSEHOLD HABITS AS GOSPEL LITURGIES

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It was 8:00 p.m. on a Wednesday evening, and bedtime with our boys was not going well. Nothing was particularly wrong, but nothing was particularly right, either.

It was more of what most nights were: two had fled the bath and begun a spontaneous wrestling match, Greco-Roman style (that is, naked), on the floor of their bedroom. The youngest had gotten involved by turning his board books into projectiles, apparently trying to break the match up by knocking one of the older two out.

I had recently left my job at an international law firm and started my own business-law practice. Lauren was pregnant with our fourth boy, because clearly our house needed more Greco-Roman wrestlers. Life was then, as it still is now, fairly high paced.

On the way to the bathroom, I was debating whether I should get back to one of my clients, who was in the middle of an investment round, or first clean the kitchen. I was also wracking my brain trying to remember whose toothbrush was the Superman one and whose was the T. rex one, because if I got this wrong, there was going to be more gnashing of teeth than brushing.

This was all interrupted when I almost slipped on some bathwater they had trailed onto the creaking floorboards of

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our hundred-year-old house in Richmond, Virginia. I barely avoided a wipeout by catching myself on a doorknob that almost shook loose, and that's when the switch flips. I don't "run out" of patience nearly so much as I decide that I'm out of patience.

The next ten minutes are a blur. I'm barking orders and moving bodies from one place to another. But it doesn't actually speed anything up; it just makes us all tense. In such moments, I begin to feel like an impotent general shouting commands that, despite their volume, seem to have little effect on anything. Things like, "I don't care, you are using this toothbrush!" And, "I pulled the book out of your hands because you weren't listening to me." Or, "No more drinks of water! We're done with water."

Finally, I reach the moment I've been waiting for. I turn the lights out and shut the door. But as I stood in the upstairs hallway, still damp with bathwater, I didn't feel the usual relief of bedtime being over. I felt conflicted and embarrassed.

I was thinking about how this was a normal night, which means their last image of me most days is of this wild taskmaster raging about how if they don't get pj's on this instant there will be dramatic physical consequences. I wondered if they sensed the irony when, before turning out the lights, I gave them a short bedtime prayer and told them that God loves them and I do too. I wondered what they think love means.

I'm not sure why this night was the occasion for my epiphany, because it certainly wasn't an unusual evening. In fact, it was typical, which is exactly what led to my epiphany: "This is our normal," I murmured to myself. And that wasn't a good thing.

### **The Significance of What's Normal**

One of the most significant things about any household is what is considered to be normal. Moments aggregate, and they become

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

memories and tradition. Our routines become who we are, become the story and culture of our families.

Standing in the hallway that night, I wasn't disappointed with my evening nearly so much as I was disappointed with my ordinary. One night is one thing. A norm is another.

Some weeks later, I was discussing our nightly chaos with one of my pastors, Derek, and he suggested I try a bedtime liturgy. "What's that?" I said. He shared with me one he does with his boys, and I was intrigued.

The idea of a bedtime liturgy sounded strange at first, but the more I thought about it the more it made sense. A liturgy, in the formal sense, is a pattern of worship we repeat over and over, hoping that the pattern draws us into worship and forms us in the image of the one we worship. This wasn't totally new to me. In fact, I had been using time outside of my law practice to write about how habits of work and technology are really patterns of worship that deeply form us.<sup>1</sup> I had thought a lot about the spiritual significance of daily habits functioning as liturgies; but honestly, I just hadn't really applied this insight to parenting and children.

But when Derek mentioned a bedtime liturgy, the realization clicked—my parenting was already filled with liturgies, just not ones that I had chosen carefully. These small patterns I had with Lauren and the boys—our waking, our meals, our car rides, our bedtimes—were all moments of worship too, guided by habits that could accurately be seen as liturgies. Liturgies of what? Now that I thought about it, probably liturgies of efficiency, impatience, rush, or frustration. These rhythms were certainly not ones I would choose, but they were the ones we had, and that needed to change.

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1. Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019).

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It was in this mix of both frustration and inspiration that I wrote my first nighttime blessing for the boys. I hoped it could be a little liturgy for sending them off to sleep and perhaps interrupt the liturgy of impatience I was defaulting to.

Here's what I wrote:

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### A BEDTIME BLESSING OF GOSPEL LOVE

*Said perhaps with a hand on your child's face or head.*

**Parent:** Do you see my eyes?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Can you see that I see your eyes?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Do you know that I love you?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Do you know that I love you no matter what bad things you do?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Do you know that I love you no matter what good things you do?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Who else loves you like that?

**Child:** God does.

**Parent:** Even more than me?

**Child:** Yes.

**Parent:** Rest in that love.

---

You can imagine how well this went the first time.

It didn't. Not at all.

They were confused. They were suddenly very interested in

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

what it meant that I could see their eyes. They took it as an invitation to poke my eyes. Suddenly eye contact was hilarious, and so on. Fortunately, by this time in my parenting career I was used to the humor, nonsense, and skirmishes that inevitably punctuate attempts at serious and spiritual moments with children. So I kept on.

Often, I forgot what I had planned to say. Sometimes I brought notes. And even after a couple of nights of practice, there was still general confusion about what was happening. But I knew from my research and writing on habits that this is exactly what it looks like every time you start a new routine. Nothing is normal until it is. At the risk of stating the obvious, the significance of a family pattern is that it's not just a moment. It is not something you do once and say, "Well, that went swimmingly!" or, "That was rough." It's a routine you practice, whether consciously or unconsciously.

After a few days of practice, a remarkable moment happened. In the midst of an equally messy evening, one of the boys, finally lying in bed, asked, "Can we have our blessing now?"

It was the point where something we've done became something we do. A habit of the household was born.

That night, I looked into their eyes, and they looked into mine, and we exchanged a brief word about God's remarkable love for us—the love he offers us in spite of our bad parenting habits and our good ones, in spite of our best days and our worst days, in spite of our proudest moments and in spite of our darkest secrets, his love never changes. For just a moment, and in kid language, we talked about this remarkable and unconditional love of God for us.

To be clear, except for this moment, this night was exactly like all the other ones. It was still chaos and there was still bathwater on the floor, but it was also punctuated by a bright spot of meaning. And that seemed to make all the difference.

## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

A couple of years later, it still does.

We now have four boys, and a nighttime blessing is a keystone habit of our evening routine. That said, board books are still weapons, naked wrestling matches are still more common than I'd prefer, toothbrushes are still the most sacred of household property rights, and I still spend a significant amount of time evaluating my life in hallways. But the thing that is different is—well, me. The circumstances are mostly the same, but my reaction to them has dramatically changed. And that is the power of a good parenting habit: by changing our knee-jerk reactions to ordinary situations, we uncover different ways of letting God's grace guide our hearts—and our children's hearts—into new patterns of life together.

This may be counterintuitive at first. It was for me. We don't often think about habits and the heart being so interconnected. But they are. To steward the habits of your family is to steward the hearts of your family.

And that's what this book is about.

### **The Heart Follows the Habit**

"You're going to love school today," I tell Whit as I zip up his coat. "You have PE, which means you get to go outside," I go on as I tie his shoes. "And if you see your brother Ash in the hallway, make sure you give him a fist bump," I remind him as I buckle his seat belt, "because brothers stick together, okay?"

This is a remarkable moment, and totally normal. You do it too. We do complicated, difficult tasks on autopilot. We flip pancakes and change diapers while also doing much more important things like chatting with a spouse or mulling over a work problem. We can do this because of the amazing phenomenon of habit.

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Habits are fascinating little things. They are the things we do over and over, semiconsciously to unconsciously. By definition, they are, of course, little. But the aggregate impact of habits is as big as each habit is small. Habits not only occupy most of our time, they form most of our minds. There is a neurological reason for this.

Modern neuroscience has shown us that habits occur in the deepest parts of our brains, the basal ganglia, which are the parts that churn on autopilot while the higher order thinking does its complex acrobatics.

This is wonderful because it frees up our higher order thinking for more important things. This is why I can tie shoes and buckle seat belts while also teaching an important lesson to Whit about how brothers are to show affection in public.

On the other hand, you can see the absence of habit's magic when you watch a toddler try to tie their own shoe—the task consumes every bit of mental energy they have. You could not break through if you were a bear on a unicycle.

This capacity of our brains to work in lower order habit while higher order thinking cruises along uninterrupted is one of God's wonderful neurological gifts to us.<sup>2</sup> When done right, we can accumulate all kinds of wonderful processes in our lower order thinking, and they become completely natural to us: the drive home, a hug on the way out the door, a nighttime blessing, a dinner table prayer, catching a football, cracking an egg,

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2. I will refer to the difference between lower and higher order thinking throughout the book. Sometimes I will also refer to the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain. In general, the lower part of the brain is the part that handles basic, ongoing, and survival-oriented tasks like fight or flight, and rest and digest. Meanwhile, the upper brain helps us do the more sophisticated work of being human like using logic, processing new information, and solving complicated problems. I will summarize the key takeaways, but if you want more on how these parts of our brains affect our life of habit, see Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012).

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or rubbing your spouse's neck. Whether rote or romantic, habits allow us to carry on in a world that's plenty complicated enough without needing to second-guess ourselves constantly.

But the neurological downside of habits is as powerful as the upside. The same feature that allows us to perform a good habit without thinking about it makes it hard to change a bad habit even when we are thinking about it. Picture a wagon wheel in a rut. It takes no effort at all to stay in the rut. But it takes incredible effort to pull the wheel out of it.

Good or bad, a rut is a rut, and our brains love ruts.

Your basal ganglia are so good at staying in the rut that you cannot just tell them to get out. Your lower brain has spent its whole life ignoring that higher order thinking. It's supposed to, after all. Its job is to keep you in the rut regardless.

In other words: *You can't think yourself out of a pattern you didn't think yourself into.* You practiced yourself into it, so you have to practice your way out.

Take my nighttime routine. I knew in my higher order brain that I didn't want to spend another evening barking orders at my children. But when I slipped on the water in the hallway, the basal ganglia (which house the fight or flight response) were triggered, and I flipped into the habit of fighting my way through the evening. The norm unfolded not just without much thought but even in spite of my thought.

This is why habits are so neurologically formative: like a rut, they take us somewhere. They have a destination even when our minds are opposed to it.

But habits are not just neurologically formative. Habits are also spiritually formative.

Because when our heads go one way but our habits go another, guess which way the heart follows?

The heart always follows the habit.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

### Seeing Ordinary Habits as Liturgies of Worship

Why? Because habits are kinds of liturgies. They are little routines of worship, and worship changes what we love. Habits of the household are not just actions that form our families' routines, they are liturgies that form our families' hearts. This is why we should choose them so carefully.

Think of it like this: when it comes to spiritual formation, our households are not simply products of what we teach and say. They are much more products of what we practice and do. And usually there is a significant gap between the two.

If our hearts always followed our heads, we would not need to practice the things we learn. We'd just learn about it and the rest would follow. But that's not how humans work, which is why the biblical understanding of sanctification is not just about education and learning but about formation and practice as well.<sup>3</sup> We are tasked not only with learning the right thing, which takes concentration and thinking,<sup>4</sup> but also with practicing the right things, which takes formation and repetition.<sup>5</sup>

Consider habits of the household as an effort to unite education and formation. Think about them as ways to align our heads and our hearts so we don't just know the right thing to do, *we also love doing the right thing*.

The neurology and spirituality of habits can seem complicated (especially if you haven't thought about any of this before), but few matters are more practical than the spirituality of habit.

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3. Phil. 4:9: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

4. Prov. 4:6-7, for example, or the emphasis on knowledge and understanding in Col. 1:9-10.

5. Prov. 22:6, for example, or the complementary emphasis on growing in good works in Col. 1:9-10.

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Here are some examples of how I've seen the interplay between my head, my heart, and my habits in my parenting life:

### WAYS NEW HABITS LEAD THE HEART

#### **My Head Thinks ... I want to be a patient person with my kids.**

##### **My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But my default habit is to reprimand them for every spill, which leads to an impatient mood of constantly snapping at them.

##### **Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I cultivated the habit of always saying (often through gritted teeth), "That's okay. Why don't you help me clean it up?" Saying this paves the way to a shared cleanup process instead of another reprimand. I *feel* more patient because I *practice* talking patiently.

#### **My Head Thinks ... I want to give my kids my full attention.**

##### **My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But the morning news notifications on my phone always get me mad and worried. I'm usually absent and distracted through the morning as we get the kids out the door.

##### **Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I cultivated the habit of turning off all notifications and not using my phone before drop-off. We are formed in the image of what we habitually gaze at. The habits of our hearts follow the habits of our phones.

#### **My Head Thinks ... I want to use moments of discipline to teach my kids, not just be angry at them.**

##### **My Old Habit Leads My Heart...**

But my constant reaction is just to get mad and yell when they act out in the same ways over and over.

##### **Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...**

Until I practiced the habit of pausing and praying before I discipline. I didn't realize that I am the one who needs a timeout. The prayerful pause doesn't make what they did right, but it helps my heart remember I'm a broken and needy child of God, just like they are. A carefully chosen habit for my kids changes my heart for my kids.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

### My Head Thinks ... I want to pray for my kids.

#### My Old Habit Leads My Heart...

But it just never happens. I worry a lot for them, but I never actually pray.

#### Until a New Habit Leads My Heart...

Until I practiced the habit of praying at their door each night before I get into bed. Sure, it is only a minute or so, but I realize that while my heart isn't good at spontaneously praying for them, it was very good at getting into a nightly routine of praying for them.

I will unpack all of these examples more in the chapters to come, but notice that just like me, most parents *want* to be patient, attentive, and loving parents who pray for their kids and show them gentleness. But until our hopes make their way from our heads to our habits, nothing changes. The idea of the parents we want to be remains stuck in our minds, and our kids suffer for that.

But it doesn't have to be that way. It is possible to practice habits of the household that lead our hearts, and our children's hearts, in new directions.

That said, let me also be careful and clear. This book will not claim that there are some easy life hacks that can kickstart your best parenting life in a couple of days. Nothing important is easy. So I will not claim that rethinking the habits of our households is easy in any sense. But what I will claim is that these habits profoundly matter to our families' spiritual formation, and changing them is possible.

It may be the most important thing you do as a parent.

### Habits of the Household as a "Rule of Life"

The idea that we should be attentive to our communal habits is not new. Not at all. There is an ancient monastic term for this

## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

idea. It's called a "rule of life." A rule of life is a pattern of shared habits intended to shape a community in the love of God.

The concept of a rule of life gains some of its roots from the story of Daniel and the way he and his fellow servants insisted that while they would serve in Babylon's courts, they would follow a different pattern of living. Their commitment to specific habits of eating, drinking, and praying (their rule of life) is what allowed them to be "in the world, but not of it."<sup>6</sup>

We see a similar idea in the early Christian church described in Acts 2. Early believers' conversions led them to adopt habits radically different from the world around them.<sup>7</sup> The distinctiveness of their habits set them apart, called them to the commitments of their faith, and attracted many others to join them.

The idea that our faith should lead us to commit to communal habits was formalized in the monasteries of famous church fathers like St. Augustine and St. Benedict, each of whom wrote a rule of life for their monasteries. If you read these wonderful documents, and you should, you will find them equal parts inspiring and eccentric. Some of the habits are nitpicky (like how much wine should be allocated to a monk),<sup>8</sup> some of them are awe-inspiring commitments to community and friendship (like Augustine's "whenever you go out, walk together, and when you reach your destination, stay together"),<sup>9</sup> and many others are exactly what you would expect—rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, and eating together.

But what you can't miss if you read these rules is the thing that motivated them: *love*. Daniel, the early church, and the monastics all were simply living out Jesus' summary of the law—the

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6. The phrase often used to summarize John 17:14-19.

7. Acts 2:42-47.

8. *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 40.

9. *Rule of St. Augustine*, chapter IV, sentence 2.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

essence of Christian life is loving God and loving neighbor. Out of centuries of this tradition of communities choosing their communal habits carefully, a new phrase began to grow: “the school of love.” All kinds of spiritual communities have used this phrase since, and with good reason.

The most Christian way to think about our households is that they are little “schools of love,” places where we have one vocation, one calling: to form all who live here into lovers of God and neighbor.

This is not a works-based legalistic endeavor, it’s a grace-based beautiful one.

When brothers and sisters who came before us set out to form communal habits, they weren’t trying to prove or earn anything. They were trying to create a framework of habit on which the love of God and neighbor could grow. In fact, the Latin root for the word *rule* didn’t mean a law you had to obey. It connoted a bar or a trellis—a framework that allows life to flourish.

These communities realized that if they didn’t shape their trellis of habit, the world would shape one for them. They were saying, “If we don’t have radical communal habits to form us, we will end up conforming to the communal patterns of the world around us.”

They saw with clear eyes that their world was malforming people into typical Babylonians and Romans. Lives that were blind to seeing God for who he is. Lives that were ordered around the love of self, the love of power, the love of riches, and the love of sex. Lives that look, from our perspective, suspiciously American.

The phrase *rule of life* might be new to you, but the concept is not. We all have a set of communal habits we are defaulting to. But most of our families are defaulting to the American set of habits, the American rule of life.

## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

By not choosing our habits carefully, we are falling back on rhythms that are forming us in all of the usual patterns of unceasing screentime, unending busyness, unrivaled consumerism, unrelenting loneliness, unmitigated addictions, and unparalleled distraction.

“Systems are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting,” so say the business gurus.<sup>10</sup> Our contemporary system of cultural habits is the same. The cultural default is perfectly designed to produce the kinds of families it is producing. We are familiar with them. So why would we, as Christians called to be ambassadors of Christ, default to this American rule of life?

In suggesting that we reconsider our habits of the household, I am suggesting that we reclaim the idea of creating a rule of life in our families so we can produce something other than the typical anxiety-ridden, depression-prone, lonely, confused, and screen-addicted teenager. So we can form children in God’s love. So we can train them in meaningful relationships. So we can teach them the peace that comes with knowing the unconditional love of Jesus. So we can create homes that are missional lights in a dark world.

We need a household rule of life if we are to become families that love the world like God loves us. This is an urgent matter for our families, and it’s also an urgent matter of neighbor love. We cannot be the lovers of God and neighbor we are called to be without examining the habits of the household.

### Being Parented by God

I’m in the hallway again, but this time it’s before I go to bed, and I’m praying at their door. This is another little habit that was born

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<sup>10</sup>. Quote often attributed to W. Edwards Deming.

## Reimagining Household Habits as Gospel Liturgies

half from intention and half from desperation. I often visit their door in the evening before sleeping and say something like this: “God, please parent me so I can parent them.”

It is years later now, and the more I’ve thought about habits and formation in the family, the more I’ve realized how connected we are. My habits are forming me into a certain kind of parent. My parenting is forming them into certain kinds of children. We are all, together, forming each other into a certain kind of family.

There is no escaping habits and formation in the family. We become our habits, and our kids become us. The family, for better or worse, is a formation machine.

The stakes are high, and if all we looked at is what we’re doing as a family, this talk about habits would be an incredible burden.

But not if we look up. When we look up, we see that we have a heavenly father, a divine parent who is parenting us. He is forming us into perfectly loved children of the King. We do not have to invent anything, carry anything, or bear the final burden of parenting. We just get to follow someone.

The Christian posture toward habits of the household is not about carrying our families on our backs and hiking up the steep mountain of life. It is much more childlike than that. It is simply about taking hold of the outstretched hand of our heavenly Father and following him, one baby step at a time.

Our best parenting comes when we think less about being parents of children and more about being children of God.

So don’t worry. Rethinking the habits of your household isn’t a heavy burden. What’s heavy is continuing to do nothing. What’s burdensome is continuing to follow default cultural habits. But taking the hand of God and being willing to follow him wherever he leads—that’s light. It’s the posture of a child.

Someone who is stronger than you and who loves you is in charge. And that’s good news for parents *and* children.