

Lesson 3

Setting Family Priorities

Arranging Your Life Around What is Really Important

Ours is not the first time to have experienced "schedule overload." Talk to those who raised families 30 or 50 years ago and you will hear of busyness, work-life balance, and stress. I grew up in a family where both parents worked outside the home. For the majority of my childhood, my dad was an assistant manager of a small town hardware store and mom sold real estate. Both of their schedules were hectic. My grandfather picked me up after school everyday until I started driving. In my mind I can still see him waiting for me standing outside his 1978 two-tone brown and tan Chevy Silverado parked in the car-rider's lane, dressed in a polo shirt, with his patented blue striped pants, wearing his favorite 80's style wide-billed hat. Most afternoons after school were spent with him and my grandmother, with mom or dad picking me up as soon as they got off work. As I got older, I got more involved in extracurricular activities at school, pursuing girls, and working part-time. Before I began to drive, getting me from place to place for this and for that became a challenge that my grandparents and parents both helped with. I don't think we were ever on complete "overload," but yes, I can remember our family being busy... and facing the challenge of making everything fit in to a finite set of hours over the course of a week or month. Looking back now it seems that my teen years flew by so fast. Not so long out of high school childhood was over. I was married by age 20, preaching full-time by 21, and a father at 22, it all seems like a blur now.

One thing that does stand out to me as I reflect over the three decades since having left my family's home, was our strong commitment to the spiritual. Life was planned out around God and worship. Our church family was very small – around 30-40 people all together. We had our squabbles, but we were all very close. Going to church on Sunday morning and Sunday night was deeply rooted in our family identity. When the semi-annual gospel meeting week came around, we were there every night. Wednesdays were church night. Planning something else on that night was unheard-of. Church socials and get-togethers were almost never neglected. If an area congregation held a gospel meeting or singing, we would try to attend. From middle school through high school the highlight of my summer was a week spent at a northwest Alabama church youth camp. All of the preachers and their families who worked with our church became close friends of our family. In fact, three of those preachers families became so intertwined with ours that we basically considered them as family. Two of those preachers had a part in my wedding, and the other conducted my dad's funeral. All of them profoundly impacted my decision to go into preaching myself. Looking back, I can say, without hesitation, that God was the highest priority in our family life.

This does not mean the family life I experienced growing up was perfect. Mom and dad would be the first to tell you they made mistakes and would like to have had some do-overs. But overall,

they did the best they could, operating from the model of parenting they had received during the 60's. During my teen years I don't remember much preaching and teaching on the family... as the focus where I was centered more on combating denominational doctrine and the reinforcement of the uniqueness of the church, respecting biblical authority, and adhering to biblical practices in order to secure one's salvation. (The conservative church in Arkansas was *very* combative to say the least.) This may not have been your exact experience, but I know I'm not alone. Despite what I perceive to may have been a lack of teaching in the church on the Christian family, I think the baby-boomer generation did their best to parent their children in following Biblical principles. Many of their children grew up to be faithful Christians. Others turned away. It has always been that way.

So here we are in the present. Times have changed. The amount of things filling up the family's time has grown drastically. Teens in the home now often control their own schedules via their smartphone and have it filled to the max. Parents are allowing their kids to overload their weekly schedule to be involved in almost every activity imaginable. Sports is now a yearlong pursuit. School clubs demand more and more time. We don't want them to miss out on anything. Somehow, church activities become optional. Families seem to be completely dominated by the fear that their children's childhood will be incomplete if they miss out on something, whether its popularity at school or a competitive advantage in sports. For many, there is little fear of their missing out on church services or youth activities. These have been relegated to secondary importance.

All of these demands are cutting into family together time. Family time can often be reduced to riding in the minivan together hurriedly on the way to the next event while scarfing down a fast-food meal. When the event is over, everyone is so tired that the first thing that happens is a retreat into the bedroom where the kids catch up on homework and parents catch up on work brought home. Tomorrow the pattern simply repeats itself. Weeks turn into months, months into years. The family connection suffers because everyone has their own life and identity, instead of a *family life*. I write from experience, now almost a decade removed from raising teens in the home. If I could go back, I'd definitely change a few things. If this was a challenge in the late '00's and throughout the 10's, how much do you think it is a challenge now?

What if I told you that what our kids need from us is more than a lifestyle of enjoying every comfort, but to see what it looks like to carry our cross daily.

And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it, Matthew 10.38-39.

They need to see that we actually believe that Christ is worth giving up everything for. They need to hear our words of instruction and experience the sacrifices that are made for what is *really* important. The hurried events of the teen years will one day be a distant memory and what was thought to be important will be realized as not essential at all.

Checking Up on Current Family Priorities

If you, at this moment, are in the season of raising your children, what would you like for your kids to remember about your family priorities? The following questions are based on some writing I found by Cody Cunningham²⁰ in his blog:

Question 1

Twenty years from now, what would you want your kids to say were the highest priorities in the home? In other words, applying the words of Steven Covey here, *begin with the end in mind*. Do you want them to answer "having fun," "playing sports," "being in the band," or "following Jesus," "opening up our home to other Christians," etc.

Consider Solomon's teaching in Proverbs 4. At the forefront of your family life is the handing down of biblical wisdom evident? Are you demonstrating to them the value of living according to that wisdom? Do they see that *it is your life* (4.13)? Are they seeing how you personally apply what Solomon said in 4.20-27?

My son, pay attention to my words; listen closely to my sayings. Don't lose sight of them; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and health to one's whole body. Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life. Don't let your mouth speak dishonestly, and don't let your lips talk deviously. Let your eyes look forward; fix your gaze straight ahead. Carefully consider the path for your feet, and all your ways will be established. Don't turn to the right or to the left; keep your feet away from evil.

You might also consider the principles found in Proverbs 22 and Ephesians 6.1-4.

Question 2

As you evaluate your current family life, what are you giving the most time and money towards? What does this say about your real priorities? While we can all do a good job in talking about what we need to do, an examination of our weekly schedule will reveal your actual priorities. What do you see when you begin to drill-down into the specifics? Where is your time focused? When it comes to decision-making, what activities take precedence?

Question 3

What things must you change in order to align your weekly schedule with your long-term priorities?

Now that you have discovered the real priorities of your life, what must happen for real change to take place? For example, if you desire to prioritize the your family's connectedness, could you plan a weekly family night where everyone keeps their schedule open so that you can share a meal together and do something together as a family? You need to create some practical ways to accomplish your goals.

Question 4

Are there areas you are ignoring for the sake of pursuing something other than the spiritual?

The degree of change needed may vary. But, a great example to focus on could be the amount of your church involvement. If you are a Christian, God calls you to participate in the life of a local

church actively. If you are not committed in the way you should be because of some other activity taking priority (such as sleep, sports, or band), you need to make changes.

You need to work through the answers to these questions with your spouse and get started. Some of the changes could be difficult, but be assured that over the long term, your family will experience the riches of honoring Christ.

How to Set Priorities

While doing research for this lesson, a journey around the internet revealed many ideas on where to begin and what to do relating to family priorities. Many experts begin with a list of things ranked in order of importance that might look something like this:

1. God
2. Marriage
3. Family
4. Work
5. Church and church family

I figure this is the paradigm most Christians have worked off during their life. It is what I heard growing up and have mostly applied over my life, with some modifications because of my ministry work. (Church, church family, and work are often combined in the life of a preacher.)

What if, instead of looking at our priorities through the lens of a list that ranks things in order of importance, we changed the imagery to a pie chart... with God at the center of it all? Let's briefly consider two passages from Colossians:

...walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light, Colossians 1.10-12.

And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him, Colossians 3.15-17.

As a son or daughter of God, you have been called to live your life fully pleasing to Him. Everything you think, react to, and initiate is to be rooted in your relationship with God. Jesus is your Lord, who calls the shots. His will needs to become your own. This will directly impact how you live inside your marriage, parent your children, foster involvement in the local church, and influence people at work. God is behind it all. God is in it all. As His servant, His will reigns supreme.

For Discussion

1. What things are filling up your schedule? Your kids? Is your family on schedule overload?

What measures do you need to take so you can slow down?

2. What does it mean to you to have a *family life*?

3. As you reflect on your childhood, what do you remember being the highest priority in your home? What would you do differently as you raise your own? If your children have already left home, what are some things you would do differently if you had the chance to do things over?

4. What does your time and money reveal about your current priorities?

5. What needs to happen if you are going to effectively change your habits and/or priorities?

6. Have you ever made up a list of important things similar to the one on the previous page and ranked your needed priorities in this manner? What works with this method? What doesn't?

7. What does it mean to you that Christ is the Lord of your life? Is it seen by the way you think and live? Explain.

²⁰ Cunningham, Cody. "What are the priorities of your family?" Online at codyacunningham.com.