

Family Worship

Sir,

A neglect of family prayer is, I am afraid, too common among professors in this day. I am glad that you consider it both as a duty and a privilege, and are by grace determined, that, when you shall commence as the head of a family, you will worship God with all your house. It was Abraham's commendation, that he not only served the Lord himself, but was solicitous that his children and household might serve him likewise. I trust that he who inclines your heart to walk in the footsteps of faithful Abraham, will bless you in the attempt, and give you peace in your dwelling; a mercy which is seldom enjoyed, which indeed can hardly be expected, by those families which call not upon the Lord.

Though I readily comply with your request, and would be glad if I can offer anything that may assist or animate you in your good purpose, I am afraid I shall not answer your expectations with regard to the particulars of your inquiry, concerning the most proper method of conducting family worship. The circumstances of families are so various, that no determinate rules can be laid down: nor has the word of God prescribed any; because, being of universal obligation, it is wisely and graciously accommodated to suit the different situations of his people. You must, therefore, as to circumstantial, judge for yourself. You will do well to pursue such a method as you shall find most convenient to yourself and family, without scrupulously binding yourself, when the Scripture has left you free.

We have no positive precept enjoining us any set time for prayer, nor even how often we should pray, either in public or private; though the expressions of "continuing instant in prayer," "praying without ceasing," and the like, plainly intimate that prayer should be frequent. Daniel prayed three times a day; which the Psalmist speaks of as his practice likewise; and in one place declares his purpose of praising God seven times a day. This last expression is perhaps indefinite, not precisely seven times—but very often. Indeed, a person who lives in the exercise of faith and love, and who finds by experience that it is good for him to draw near to God, will not need to be told how often he must pray, any more than how often he must converse with an earthly friend. Those whom we love, we love to be much with. Love is the best casuist, and either resolves or prevents a thousand scruples and questions, which may perplex those who only serve God from principles of constraint and fear. A believer will account those his happiest days, when he has most leisure and most liberty of spirit for the exercise of prayer.

However, I think family should be performed at least daily, and, when unavoidable hindrances do not prevent, twice a day. Though all times and seasons are alike to the Lord, and his ear is always open whenever we have a heart to call upon him; yet to us there is a peculiar suitableness in beginning and closing the day with prayer: in the morning, to acknowledge his goodness in our preservation through the night, and entreat his presence and blessing on our families and callings in the course of the day; and at night, to praise him for the mercies of the day past, to humble ourselves before him for what has been amiss, to wait on him for a renewed manifestation of his pardoning love, and to commit ourselves and our concerns to his care and protection while we sleep.

You will, of course, choose those hours when you are least liable to be interrupted by the calls of business, and when the family can assemble with the most convenience: only I would observe, that it greatly preserves regularity and good order in a house, to keep constantly to the same hours when it is practical; and likewise, that it is best not to defer evening prayer until late, if it can be well avoided; lest some who join in the exercise, and perhaps the person himself who leads in it, should be too weary or sleepy to give a due attention. On this account, I would advise to have family prayer before supper, where people have the choice and disposal of their own hours.

I think, with you, that it is very expedient and proper that reading a portion of the word of God should be ordinarily a part of our family worship; so likewise to sing a hymn or psalm, or part of one, at discretion; provided there are some people in the family who have enough of a musical ear and voice to conduct the singing in a tolerable manner: otherwise, perhaps, it may be better omitted. If you read and sing, as well as pray, care should be taken that the combined services do not run into an inconvenient length.

The chief thing to be attended to is, that it may be a spiritual service; and the great evil to be dreaded and guarded against in the exercise of every duty that returns frequently upon us, is formality. If a stated course of family prayer is kept up as constantly in its season as the striking of the clock, in time it may come to be almost as mechanically performed, unless we are continually looking to the Lord to keep our hearts alive.

It most frequently happens, that one or more members of a family are unconverted people. When there are such present, a great regard should be had to them, and everything conducted with a view to their edification, that they may not be disgusted or wearied, or tempted to think that it is little more than the fashion or custom of the house; which will probably be the case, unless the master of the family is lively and earnest in performance of the duty, and likewise circumspect and consistent in every part of his behavior at other times. By leading in the worship of God before children or strangers, a man gives bond (as it were) for his behavior, and adds strength to every other motive which should engage him to abstain from all appearance of evil. It should be a constant check upon our language and tempers in the presence of our families, to consider that we began the day, and propose to end it, with them in prayer. The Apostle Peter uses this argument to influence the conduct of husbands and wives towards each other; and it is equally applicable to all the members of a family; "That your prayers be not hindered," that is, either prevented and put off, or despoiled of all life and efficacy, by the ferment of sinful passions.

On the other hand, the proper exercise of family prayer, when recommended by a suitable deportment, is a happy means of instructing children in the great truths of religion, of softening their prejudices, and inspiring them with a temper of respect and affection, which will dispose them to cheerful obedience, and make them unwilling to grieve or offend.

In this instance, as in every other, we may observe, that the Lord's commands to his people are not arbitrary appointments; but that, so far as they are conscientiously complied with, they have an evident tendency and suitableness to promote our own advantage. He requires us to acknowledge him in our families, for our own sakes; not because he has need of our poor services, but because we have need of his blessing, and without the influence of his grace (which is promised to all who seek it) are sure to be unhappy in ourselves and in all our connections.

When husband and wife are happily partakers of the same faith, it seems expedient, and for their mutual good, that, besides their private devotions, and joining in family prayer, they should pray

together. They have many needs, mercies, and concerns, in common with each other, and distinct from the rest of the family. The manner in which they should improve a little time in this joint exercise cannot well be prescribed by a third person: yet I will venture to suggest one thing; and especially, as I do not remember to have met with it in print. I conceive that it may prove much to their comfort to pray alternately, not only the husband with and for the wife, but the wife with and for the husband. The Spirit of God, by the Apostle, has expressly restrained women from the exercise of spiritual gifts in public; but I apprehend the practice I am speaking of can no way interfere with that restriction. I suppose them in private together, and then I judge it to be equally right and proper for either of them to pray with the other. Nor do I meet anything in Paul's writings to prevent my thinking, that if he had been a married man, he would, though an Apostle, have been glad for the prayers of his wife. If you ask, how often they should pray together? I think the oftener the better, provided it does not break in upon their duties; once a day at least; and if there is a choice of hours, it might be as well at some distance from their other seasons of worship. But I would observe, as before, that in matters not expressly commanded, prudence and experience must direct.

I have written upon a supposition that you use extemporaneous prayer; but as there are many heads of families who fear the Lord, and have not yet attained liberty to pray extemporaneously before others, I would add, that their inability in this respect, whether real, or whether only proceeding from fear, and an undue regard to self, will not justify them in the omission of family prayer. Helps may be procured. Mr. Jenks's Devotions are in many hands; and I doubt not but there are other excellent books of the same kind, with which I am not acquainted. If they begin with a form, not with a design to confine themselves always to one, but make it a part of their secret pleading at the Throne of Grace, that they may be favored with the gift and spirit of prayer; and accustom themselves, while they use a form, to intersperse some petitions of their own; there is little doubt but they will in time find a growth in liberty and ability, and at length lay their book entirely aside. For it being every believer's duty to worship God in his family, his promise may be depended upon, to give them a sufficiency in all things, for those services which he requires of them.

Happy is that family where the worship of God is constantly and conscientiously maintained. Such houses are temples in which the Lord dwells, and castles garrisoned by a Divine power. I do not say, that, by honoring God in your house, you will wholly escape a share in the trials incident to the present uncertain state of things. A measure of such trials will be necessary for the exercise and manifestation of your graces; to give you a more convincing proof of the truth and sweetness of the promises made to a time of affliction; to mortify the body of sin; and to wean you more effectually from the world. But this I will confidently say, that the Lord will both honor and comfort those who thus honor him. Seasons will occur in which you shall know, and probably your neighbors shall be constrained to take notice, that he has not bid you seek him in vain. If you meet with troubles, they shall be accompanied by supports, and followed by deliverance; and you shall upon many occasions experience, that God is your protector, preserving you and yours from the evils by which you will see others suffering around you.

I have rather exceeded the limits I proposed; and therefore shall only add a request, that in your addresses at the Throne of Grace you will remember me.



John Newton

John Newton (1725 – 1807) was a sailor, preacher, and hymnwriter who was a leader of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. He is known for his conversion to Christ after a career in the slave trade and the hymn 'Amazing Grace'.

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