



Weekly Family Devotions

Dear Parents,

No two families are exactly alike, but the consistent message of the Bible is that God's plan and purpose for every family is still the same: He wants parents, grandparents, and other people of God to pass faith along to the next generation (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 78:1-8). Two of the ways we can carry out this important calling from God within our homes is to have faith conversations with our children throughout the course of the day, and also at intentional times. With that in mind, it is our earnest prayer that this six-week family devotional guide will be a practical resource you can use to help point your kids to the Lord.

On the following pages you'll find six lesson plans for families. The topics correspond with the six primary topics that are covered in the 40-Day **Perfectly One** church and small-group study. Along with the messages in the worship services, our children and youth will also be focusing on these topics during their class times. We would encourage you to find the time to do one of these lessons with your family each week during this series at Bridges.

Each lesson begins with a devotional reading for you to go through with your children. You'll also find suggestions for shared activities and discussions that were created to help you and your kids connect with each other and to engage in meaningful and productive faith conversations related to each week's topic.

If in your conversations your child asks a question that you don't have an answer for, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," or "Let's look in the Bible," or "Let's ask another friend at church about that."

Here are some additional ideas you may want to consider

- You might want to begin and close each devotional time with a short prayer.
- Try to make the devotions as fun and inviting for your kids as possible. You can do them outdoors, while eating popcorn together, while sitting in a booth at a restaurant, in different rooms of the house, in the morning, at nighttime before bed – anywhere and anytime that works for your family and promotes interaction!
- Keep it simple. If you have younger children, you should definitely consider paraphrasing or condensing the readings and discussion questions to make the concepts easier to understand and to reinforce the main idea behind each topic.
- Keep it short. These Family Devotions are designed to foster conversations, but remember that kids (and some adults as well!) have short attention spans.
- Be intentional. Families are busier now than ever, so the more intentional you are about having devotions together, the more likely they will actually take place.

May God use these six **Weekly Family Devotions** to center your family's focus on God's redeeming love as expressed through the cross, inspire you to pursue unity within your relationships, and enable you to make family memories together.

Week 1

God's Desire

" . . . that they may become perfectly one . . . "

John 17:23

Imagine wanting to build a treehouse with your family or friends. What would happen if there were no blueprints or instructions and everybody was free to decide how they think the treehouse should be built? And what would happen if everybody that wanted to help out also refused to communicate with each other or started taking tools from one another without asking? How difficult would it be to maintain unity among the group and to make sure that the project got finished safely and properly?

Everyone in a family or on a team plays an important role in maintaining unity. However, if one person decides that they want to do their own thing, that they should be in charge, that they are more important than the rest of the group, or that they don't need anybody else, then it suddenly becomes much more challenging to work towards the same goal and to have unity with one another.

Unity is especially important to God. In fact, on the same night that He was arrested and about to die on the cross for the sins of the world, Jesus prayed that all of His followers would be *perfectly one*. Just think: He could have been more focused on so many other things that night, but in His last moments with His disciples before He was crucified, Jesus chose to pray that we would have perfect unity with one another.

What does unity mean? Well first, here's what unity *doesn't* mean: It doesn't mean that everybody should look alike and think alike, and unity also doesn't mean that everybody will always agree with one another. God made you one-of-a-kind, and He gave you and everyone else unique personalities with unique interests and unique talents, so it's okay – in fact it's good - to be uniquely different from the rest of the world!

For Christ-followers, however, unity *does* mean that we will do whatever we can to not let our differences divide us. It means that we will work at getting along and being at peace with each other. It means that we will be committed to sacrificially love one another and to focus more on the shared life we have through faith in Christ than we will upon our own individual preferences and opinions. And it means that, as the family of God, we have one common purpose, and that is to please God in everything that we do (1 Corinthians 10:31).

God wants us to live in unity with one another so that everyone will know that God sent Jesus into the world and that He loves them. Living in unity is not always easy to do, but we must never forget that we are called by God as His children to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1).

Are you willing to do your part?

Do

- Brainstorm together something you can make and place within your home to symbolize and remind you of your family's commitment to unity with one another and within the Body of Christ. For instance, you might want to take a family portrait and create a frame for it together, make a wall hanging that has each family members' handprints on it, or create a family wreath that displays important words or messages related to the topic of unity.
- Have a 3-legged race as a family. Start by taking a bandana or a sheet and strapping the left leg of one family member to the right leg of another family member. The object is for each team to run together without falling over. After the race, talk about what you observed and experienced regarding the importance of working together.

Discuss

- Share about a time when you were part of a team and experienced good cooperation. Follow that by sharing about a time when you were part of an activity in which there was little unity or cooperation. What did you learn from those experiences?
- What are some examples of everyday activities in which unity and cooperation are essential?
- How would you rate your family when it comes to maintaining unity?
- What are one or two goals you have for your family as it applies to pursuing unity?

Week 2

Humility

“A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’”

Luke 22:24-27

Who would you say is the greatest athlete in the world? How about the greatest painter, the greatest musician, or the greatest leader?

We all have our own personal opinions about who is the greatest in any particular field. And maybe you’ve dreamed yourself about someday being considered the greatest at something. But what would you do if someone in your family were to say, “Hey, everyone, I have an important announcement to make. I just want you all to know that I am the greatest person in this family!”

You might laugh at that person at first, because you know just how imperfect they really are. Or maybe you’d be angry at them for being so selfish and prideful to think that they are better than you and everybody else.

That must have been how Jesus’ disciples felt when, on more than one occasion (Matthew 18:1-5; Matthew 20:17-28), they actually argued and fought with each other about which one of them was the greatest.

When Jesus found out about His followers’ arguments, He took the opportunity to teach them – and us – a very important lesson: Greatness is not about who has more money or more talent or more power. True greatness, Jesus said, is determined by humility and service.

Being humble is not something that comes very naturally for us. We may not like to admit it, but we are all born with the feeling that the world revolves around us. We need and want to be recognized by others as important. We want others to honor and serve us. We like to be in charge and to win every argument. And it makes us feel jealous and inferior when someone else gets more attention or praise than we do.

But Jesus is saying that, as Christ-followers, we are called to live differently than the rest of the world. We are called to follow His example of humility. Jesus consistently served others and put their interests and needs above Himself. And even though He was and is God, and had every right to be arrogant and selfish, demanding that others serve him, Jesus sacrificed Himself throughout His life for the good of others, and He sacrificed Himself for all of us when He died on the cross for our sins.

Why is this so important for families to remember? It’s important, because it’s really hard to get along and to love each other when you or anyone else in your family puts themselves first. And it’s important,

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because if we want to have the kind of unity in our families that God wants, then we need to make the choice each day to be humble and to set our selfishness aside. The more we practice humility, the more we will become like Jesus and the more we will please God.

Do

- Read the following scenarios aloud. Discuss whether or not the children in each scenario are being prideful or humble. After you discuss these scenarios, create some additional scenarios of your own.
 1. Elizabeth was excited to get a good grade on her math quiz. She thanked her parents afterwards for encouraging her and helping her to study the night before.
 2. Ian saw the mess his younger brother made in the hallway at home. Ian knew one of his parents would probably clean it up, but he decided to clean it up himself before his parents noticed.
 3. Miranda and her friend both had solos in the school play, but Miranda was upset afterwards when her friend seemed to get more attention than she did.
 4. David went over to his friend's house. David told his friend, "My house is better, because it's bigger than yours."
 5. Stacie used her own allowance to buy and donate a toy for her church's Christmas Toy Drive.
 6. Robert noticed that nobody was sitting next to the new student at lunch, so he went over and sat with him.

Discuss

- Who is someone in your life who strikes you as being very humble? What makes them seem humble to you?

- Name some times when it is challenging for you to be humble at home. What about at school? With your friends? Before God?

- Practically speaking, what would it look like if you were to “*consider others above yourself*” (Philippians 2:3)?

Week 3

Peacemaking

*“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,
live at peace with everyone.”*

Romans 12:18

When was the last time you got into an argument with someone? Maybe it was with someone at school or at church or perhaps with someone in your own family. It can happen to all of us.

Sometimes our arguments and disagreements don't last very long. That may be because the argument is over something relatively small or unimportant. But sometimes our arguments aren't so easy to fix, especially if they're with someone you trust or with someone you thought was your friend. Those types of arguments can often be the hardest to solve, because they can be so hurtful and personal.

When you've been arguing with someone, what should you do? You could go to the other person and apologize, but what if the argument was the other person's fault? And what if the other person doesn't ever come to you and tell you that they are sorry?

Romans 12:18 tells us that God wants *you* to be the one to make the first move to make things right whenever you're fighting with someone. He wants *you* to do whatever *you* can to live at peace with the other person, even if that person was completely to blame for the argument. That sounds really difficult to do, but we need to remember that our relationships are typically much more important to God than whatever it is that we're arguing about.

And on top of that, we need to seek to make peace with others because that's exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus was our peacemaker! The Bible tells us in Ephesians 2:1-5 that all of us were in a fight with God. We were always doing the wrong things and not listening to what God would say to us. But instead of punishing us for those things, God wanted to have peace with us, even though we were the ones doing the wrong things. God the Father sent Jesus to the earth to die for our sins on the cross so that we could be at peace with God.

So, as strange as it may sound, our arguments and disagreements can actually be great opportunities. They are opportunities to make choices that are honoring and pleasing to God, and they are opportunities for us to show others the type of love that Jesus demonstrated for us. *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

Do

- Try to memorize today's Bible verse (Romans 12:18) together as a family. To aid in memorizing, write down each word from the verse on separate sheets of paper. Then mix up the pieces of paper and take turns putting the words together in order.

Discuss

- What are some good ways for people to disagree with one another? What are some wrong ways for people to disagree with one another?

- How difficult is it for you to make the first move when it comes to making peace with someone you've wronged or with someone who has wronged you?

- What are some specific ways that you can pursue peace and try to make things right when you become aware that you've wronged someone?

- How should you respond to someone who continually refuses to live at peace with you?

Week 4

Forgiveness

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Colossians 3:13

When someone does something that hurts you, how do you typically react? Do you yell at the other person? Do you seek revenge and try to hurt that person in return? Do you demand that the other person pay for what they’ve done? Do you tell other people about how unkind that person who hurt you is?

Most of us want to do all of these things. But Colossians 3:13 gives us a completely different way to respond to people who hurt us: We should follow Jesus’ example and forgive them. After all, if Jesus was willing to forgive us of our sins, then shouldn’t we be willing to forgive others as well?

If you’ve ever tried to learn to play an instrument, to learn another language, to play a sport, or to learn how to do something new, you know that it usually takes a lot of commitment and practice to keep getting better at that activity. In the same way, becoming a forgiving person is also a big commitment and takes a lot of practice. Fortunately, every conflict and every disagreement we have is another chance for us to practice becoming more forgiving people!

Here are some important points about forgiveness that we need to keep in mind:

- **Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling.** It’s a choice to let go of the hurt that somebody caused you. And as we saw in last week’s devotional reading, you don’t have to wait for an apology before you forgive.
- **Forgiveness is an ongoing process.** Just because you choose to forgive someone doesn’t mean that you will immediately feel better about what happened, and it doesn’t guarantee that the person won’t hurt you again. In Matthew 18:21-22 Jesus taught His disciples that we may need to be ready to forgive multiple times. (Just think about how many times God has forgiven you!)
- **Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting.** Forgiveness doesn’t mean acting as if the person never hurt you, but it does mean not holding that person’s sin against them anymore. 1 Corinthians 13:5 says that love keeps no record of wrongs.
- **Forgiveness is a gift.** Have you ever noticed that the word *give* is part of the word *forgive*? Forgiveness is an incredible gift from God that we have received, and it is an incredible gift that we can offer to others as well.

Remember that whenever you forgive others, you are showing the whole world that God has forgiven you.

Do

- Choosing to not forgive others is like carrying a big weight around with us. It's a burden that you put on other people, and it's a burden to carry around yourself. To help teach this concept to your kids, place a backpack on someone's back. Start adding different items (e.g., books or soup cans) to the backpack in order to make it heavier. As you do, talk about how the extra weight is like carrying around unforgiveness in our hearts. Then gradually begin to remove weight and talk about the freedom we begin to experience as we choose to forgive those who hurt us. (If you don't have a backpack available, you can use a shopping bag or suitcase.)
- Jesus said that we are to be willing to forgive others "seventy times seven" in response to Peter's question about how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us. To reinforce the idea of "70 x 7" forgiveness, choose a task that each member of the family needs to do 490 times (e.g., take 490 steps, do 490 jumping jacks, draw 490 smiley faces, etc.). Discuss afterwards that, while Jesus was not actually limiting forgiveness to 490 times, He wanted to get across the point that we should be willing to forgive someone as many times as necessary.

Discuss

- Share an example from your own life when someone forgave you. What was that experience like?
- What type of offense do you find most difficult to forgive?
- How might extending forgiveness to someone heal a relationship? How might it heal the other person? How might it heal you?
- What steps do you need to take in order to love and to pray for someone whom you need to forgive?

Week 5

Differences

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Romans 15:7

Can you remember a time when you weren't picked for something: for a part in the school play; for a spot on a team; for acceptance into a certain club; for a job? Not being picked for something can be disappointing and painful and can make us feel like we're not accepted. Unfortunately, that is something that everybody feels and experiences at some time in their life.

Romans 15:7 doesn't promise us that we'll always make the team or that everything will always work out for us. But it does give us hope, because it reminds us that Jesus accepts into His family anyone who believes in what Jesus has done for them on the cross and who receives Him into their lives (John 1:12; Acts 16:31). And if you've made the decision to follow Jesus, you too have been accepted into His forever family!

Did you know that Jesus loved everyone when He was on the earth? He even accepted people whom others rejected. For example, the Bible tells us that Jesus was a *“friend of sinners”* (Matthew 11:19). He was also kind to children, to the poor, to tax collectors, to the blind and the lame, and to people with various diseases. In other words, He accepted, greeted, and spent time with people who were quite different from Him.

Because God does not limit His love to only certain groups or types of people, it is wrong anytime we reject other people because of the color of their skin, or how they dress, or where they are from, or because they're different from us in some way. God has made everyone in His image, and because of that, everyone has great value. That means that we can and should love and accept others, even if we don't like what they do, even if they have different beliefs than we do, and even if they reject us. We are to accept others, because God has accepted us.

And why should we do this? Because, as this week's verse teaches us, it makes God happy whenever we accept others as God accepts us.

Do

- Write on a sheet of paper all of the various things that make each member of your family unique and different from one another. Celebrate these differences together and discuss how each of these differences can benefit your family. Brainstorm additional ideas of what makes your family different from other families.
- Take a nature walk as a family. Point out differences between similar objects (e.g., rocks, trees, leaves, insects, etc.). If your family is large enough, you could also split into different groups and take photos of what you discover and then share them when you reconvene with the others.

Discuss

- Share about a time when it felt really good to be accepted by others. Then share about a time when you weren't accepted. What did the experience of not being accepted feel like?
- How accepting of others would people say that you are of those who are different from you? On what would they base their opinion?
- Name some individuals or groups of people who might not normally feel welcome at church because they are "different" from everybody else. What are some practical ways that your family can demonstrate Christ-like kindness and acceptance to these individuals?

Week 6

Dependence

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5

“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

Philippians 4:13

Think about all the toys and electronics you use and play with throughout the day. Many of those items likely depend upon a battery or electrical power in order to operate. Just as those things are unable to function apart from an outside power source, we too need to stay connected to God’s unlimited power in our lives if we are to accomplish the things that God wants us to do.

John 15:5 helps us to better understand this important truth. In the same way that no branch can live on its own or produce fruit or leaves by itself if it is no longer connected to a trunk or a vine, neither can we have life or power apart from God. Jesus said that anything we try to do on our own or in our own power is hopeless. It’s wasted effort.

But the apostle Paul said that through Christ he could do *“all things.”* Paul’s complete dependence upon God’s power is what enabled him to endure difficult times throughout his life as a Christ-follower. And in the same way, our complete dependence upon God is our only hope if we are to make progress in the different areas that we’ve covered in these devotional readings. We need to rely upon God’s strength if we are to learn to have unity, to forgive others, to accept others who are different from us, and to live at peace with others.

This means that we need to continually stay connected to God. We need Him not just on Sundays and not just when we’re at church, but for every moment of every day. God wants you to trust Him and to completely depend upon Him. And as you do, He will do more through you than you could ever do on your own.

Do

- How many items in your home can you find that require some type of power source in order to operate? If you want, you can turn this activity into a timed challenge and see how many items your family members can find in one minute.
- Plant something together as a family that will be a visual reminder of your family's need to depend upon, and to stay connected to, the Vine (Jesus).

Discuss

- What part do you play and what part does God play in helping a plant to grow? How is this similar or different from the way that we grow in our faith?
- Jesus promised that if we stay connected to Him, we will bear much fruit. What specific "fruit" do you think should be evident in your life if you are depending upon Him?
- Name a time in your life when you tried to do something in your own strength instead of depending upon God. What did that experience teach you?
- As you reflect on the various topics we've read about and discussed in these six Family Devotions, which one of the topics do you personally need God to help you with the most in order to make greater progress? Why? How can your family members help you grow in this area?