**Order of Evening Family Devotions – An Explanation and General Notes**

**By Pastor Ryan Loeslie**

***Short Devotion***

You’ve heard all your Christian life that the Bible is the Word of God and that Christians should read it for its divine wisdom, the central message being the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Here you have your chance to put that into practice. The Gospel of Matthew is recommended because in it we have the very words recording the life and ministry of Jesus himself. Every night, sit down with your family and read out-loud a short portion. Most Bibles are edited into short readable sections with headings in bold print, so give it a shot. You will be rewarded. Any book of the Bible is good reading, but the Gospel of Matthew (or Luke) is an excellent place to start. Feel free to work through it slowly, always picking up where you left off the night before.

If you have small children, you can substitute reading straight from the Bible with an illustrated children’s Bible. “A Child’s Garden of Bible Stories” from Concordia Publishing House is recommended here. If your children are in elementary school, CPH’s “120 Bible Stories” is excellent. There are also other options out there that may work well for your family. Concordia Publishing House’s famous “Arch Books” series also comes to mind. Just ask the pastor and he will help you get what you need. It is important that Christian children learn all the main stories of the Bible.

Some people have maybe had their own devotional routine for years. The Portals of Prayer, for one, has served many people well this way. If you have a routine for reading the Bible or a favorite devotional book, stick with it! Only find a way here to include your family, that you may read out-loud to them.

***Hymn***

Martin Luther called music the highest art, next to theology. The Lutheran church is often known as the singing church. The Lutheran hymns of especially the 16th and 17th centuries are perhaps the finest hymns ever written. They are Christ-centered, clear in their proclamation of Law and Gospel, and are carried by beautiful tunes. As music cheers the heart, it is good to develop the habit of singing a hymn every day with your family. A good place to start is the hymn of the day which you sang on Sunday (the hymn immediately prior to the sermon). These are in many ways the core hymns of the Lutheran church, and they will serve you well no matter whether you are young or old.

If you feel that you are poor at singing, do not let this heap guilt or pressure upon you. Just know that our hymns are a jewel of our heritage, and they are worth the effort when you decide to spend it.

***Reading From Luther’s Small Catechism***

We all learned from Luther’s Small Catechism in Confirmation Class. What you maybe didn’t learn is that Martin Luther didn’t write the Small Catechism for a church or classroom setting, but mainly for the home. Although Luther lamented the lack of parental involvement in his day and pastors today continue to pick up the slack in teaching the Catechism, the Catechism’s teaching really sticks best when it is taught regularly in the home by heads of households. A Christian who does not know his catechism basics is like a child who doesn’t know his ABC’s and 123’s, so we are talking about something quite serious here when it comes to the faith.

The method in teaching the Small Catechism is quite easy. It is simply question and answer. For example, ask “What is the First Commandment?” The family responds together, “You shall have no other gods.” Ask then again, “What does this mean?” The family responds, “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” That is all it needs to be, or you can work on memorizing with your kids. You can ask them individually, too. When you do this exercise every evening, the Small Catechism will become more a part of you. It will give you much more confidence and joy in your Christian faith.

The Small Catechism can be especially fun with small children. Have them repeat after you, one or two words at a time. They can learn a lot very quickly if you do this on a consistent basis.

Included in these instructions is a chart dividing Small Catechism readings over the course of the church year. One short reading from the Small Catechism is assigned for each week, to be repeated every night of the week. Take notice in church on Sunday which week of the church year you are in, and you will see on your chart the assigned Small Catechism reading. You can see there also how you will cover the entire Small Catechism over the course of an entire church year. It would be a great accomplishment to follow through with this with your family. And year after year, you can get to know and love these beautiful words more and more.

Over time, you may want to include some more Small Catechism work in addition to the assigned reading, especially if you have children who have memory work to do for confirmation class. Some children will have their favorite parts of the Small Catechism. Let them recite these every night if they wish. Be spontaneous. Let it be fun. It will be once you are solid in your routine.

Small Catechisms come in pamphlet form and are cheap. Talk to the pastor and he will make sure to get you enough copies for the whole family. You may also find the Small Catechism beginning on page 321 in your Lutheran Service Book hymnal. This is especially handy if you also incorporate a hymn into your evening devotions.

***Prayers***

Prayer is essential to any Christian devotional life. In praying to our Father in heaven we imitate the example of our Lord Jesus himself. The model of prayer given in this order of family devotions is based on Luther’s suggestions for daily prayer from the Small Catechism.

Begin with the Invocation, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Luther suggests making the sign of the cross on your chest while saying the Invocation in remembrance of your Baptism. Start with your fingertips on your forehead, move down to touch your breastbone, cross shoulder to shoulder, and finish by touching your breastbone once again as you say “Amen.” This is another good practice to teach to children. If you did not grow up making the sign of the cross and are uncomfortable with it, that is no problem. You are free to omit this. Only remember to say the words.

Our prayers begin with reciting the Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed is our most basic confession of who we believe God is. It is best that Christians recite this creed once every day.

Continue with the Lord’s Prayer. We pray this prayer because our Lord Jesus gave it to us, and it is the very best model of all Christian prayer. Christians should recite the Lord’s Prayer every day also, and children should begin learning it even as they are learning to talk.

Even as we learn prayers from the Bible like the Lord’s Prayer, it is good that we pray from our own hearts also. At this time it is good for a father to pray out-loud for his family and anything else that requires prayer. Just because this prayer comes from the heart doesn’t mean it can’t follow a regular pattern. Thank God for your marriage, children, home, work, and congregation. Ask him to bless these gifts. He is the One who gave these gifts to you. You are therefore duty-bound to thank him for these things. When you do this, God isn’t the only one who notices. Your family will as well. And so you will find this practice beneficial to your marriage, and your children will see the impact of prayer as you pray out-loud for them in their presence. This is a good thing, absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. It is an effective weapon against the devil, world, and our sinful flesh.

The prayers may conclude with Luther’s Evening Prayer. This is a beautiful little prayer which has been in use for almost 500 years now, and it has been prayed by literally millions of Lutherans across the world. It’s also a nice, easy way to practice being uniquely Lutheran. It is not absolutely necessary, but highly encouraged.

Luther encourages you to “Then go to sleep at once and in good cheer.” This is just a recommendation. The point is, this process of praying with your family is a wonderful thing which will cheer your heart when you make it a priority in your life. At the very least, put your children to bed knowing you have commended them into God’s hands. Whether you go to bed or not is entirely up to you.

As with reading devotional material, your prayer routine may already be quite regular, and you may already have your own favorite prayers. I know many of us grew up using the “Now I lay me down to sleep” bedtime prayer. If you feel you need to simplify this routine or tailor it to your own family traditions, that is just fine. Let this material supplement what you are doing if you find it useful.

***General Notes***

As a general rule, the husband/father should lead every part of family devotions. As the head of his household, it is his God-given duty. Just as God has given pastors to our congregations, a husband/father is a pastor in his own home. Of course, necessity knows no rules. If a husband/father must be absent, the wife/mother steps in and leads family devotions. If time constraints are absolutely unavoidable or the household is sick, at the very least pray the Lord’s Prayer together. It is best to say it no matter the circumstances.

There is no rule that says family devotions must take place in the evening before bedtime. This order can be adapted to any time of day. Many prefer to do devotions in the morning, and that is a good option also. The dinner table is also a good place to do this.

While these may be some detailed instructions, this whole order for family devotions is really quite simple. It probably only requires about 10 to 15 minutes of time every evening. Your family will catch on quickly when you do this faithfully.

No doubt, this devotional routine requires discipline and perhaps reorienting our priorities. But be encouraged. There is nothing better you can do for yourself and your family than to read God’s Word to them and pray with them. Your pastor and congregation are here to encourage you. We are in this together, and we know that God will richly bless our efforts. “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).