

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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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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To Whit, Asher, Coulter, and Shep

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



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FOREWORD

[to come]

FOREWORD



INTRODUCTION



REIMAGINING HOUSEHOLD HABITS AS GOSPEL LITURGIES

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 much gnashing of teeth rather than brushing of them.

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 avoid a wipeout by catching myself on a doorknob that almost shakes 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

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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.¹ 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.

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.

You can see what I wrote in the sidebar.

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 good things you do?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Do you know that I love you no matter what bad 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

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in 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

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bathwater on the floor, but it was also punctuated by a bright spot of meaning. And that seemed to make all the difference.

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 places.

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 a 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 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 part of our brains, the basal ganglia, which is the part that churns on autopilot while the top 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.² 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,

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 is so good at staying in the rut that you cannot just tell it 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.

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 top 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 houses the fight or flight response) was 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.

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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.³ We are tasked not only with learning the right thing, which takes concentration and thinking,⁴ but also with practicing the right things, which takes formation and repetition.⁵

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.

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 and not just be angry at my kids.

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.

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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, many parents want to be patient, attentive, and loving parents who pray for their kids and show them gentleness. But if our hopes don't make their way from our heads to our habits, nothing changes. The idea of the parents we want to be remains stuck in our heads, 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

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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."⁶

We see a similar idea in the early Christian church described in Acts 2. Early believers' conversion led them to adopt habits radically different from the world around them.⁷ 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),⁸ 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"),⁹ 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

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.

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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. 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.

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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.¹⁰ 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

¹⁰. Quote often attributed to W. Edwards Deming.

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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.



HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

My greatest hope is not that you sit down in a quiet place and read this book alone. You might do that with a good novel, but this book is quite a bit different. It's not so much full of things to read as it is full of things to try.

So I hope, rather, that you read snatches of it between toddler fits and soccer trips. I hope that you nod off during a chapter because the baby was up last night, and get distracted at a good part because your twelve-year-old drops a surprise question about sex. I hope that you read a page aloud for your spouse, then put it down and talk about it. I hope that you stop between chapters and try out a habit, and then make notes when it doesn't work quite like you thought it would. I hope that you skip around because you feel good about where family mealtimes are but feel lost at sea when it comes to moments of discipline. I hope that you read it in groups of parents who are comfortable enough to admit that none of us really knows what we're doing, so we can talk about it honestly. I hope that you spill coffee on it or milk on it or tea on it or wine on it. I hope you argue with your spouse (just a little bit) over whether these habits matter and why. I hope it gets left dog-eared on your kitchen counter and stuffed in your diaper bag.

That would be the highest honor, because that means that this book is in the hands of the right person. A parent in a messy house. A parent in the trenches. A parent like me.

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I write this book to parents in the thick of it because I am a parent in the thick of it myself.

I Write from a Messy House

This morning I woke to crumbs on the kitchen floor and used up the last of the milk. Last night one of the boys (who will remain unnamed) pulled his pants down during family devotions (or almost did—I caught him just in time). Right now laundry is on the kitchen table, the yard needs some serious work, and I am postponing a work call to type this paragraph. We are overwhelmed, and that's not unusual for us.

Yesterday, Lauren texted me asking for extra prayer because the boys were “so hard.” I texted back, “Will pray. I get it—me too,” and I wasn't just feigning sympathy. I actually did stop and pray because I think I actually do get it.

Parenting is really hard, mostly messy, and none of us shines at it.

At best, I am a tired, confused, impatient, guilt-ridden, and regret-prone father whose only hope is that Jesus actually did live, die, and rise again. My only hope is that grace means that that divine reality will somehow break into my reality. Because my reality is that I don't feel like I'm good at my job as a parent.

The good news is that the more I talk to parents, the more I realize that we all feel the same way! I've learned Mandarin Chinese, graduated with honors from a top law school, passed the bar exam, practiced mergers and acquisitions at international law firms, worked my way out of the anxiety crashes that those firms tend to cause, written books and started my own business—and I still think that parenting is hands down the hardest thing I've ever done.

So I admittedly (and unashamedly) write from the trenches.

How to Read This Book

And we might as well level on that. During the time of my writing this book, my four boys ranged in age from one to nine, and it has not been easy.

If you want to picture a parent who has it all together and can tell you how to do it right, let me as politely as possible show you to the door. I am not that person.

But you might as well know that no one else is either.

This means, mercifully, that we can all stop the guilt and the judging. Our conversation in this book, I hope, is like the place the church is meant to be: a place for recovering sinners to rejoice that we are all fouled up but God loves us anyway. So it is that I write about habits of the household from a messy household.

Some of these sentences were written downstairs before the kids woke. Others were scribbled on a pad when I should have been clearing the table. Some were typed at the office while I snoozed a couple of client emails, and some were hastily tapped out on my phone in the middle of a backyard fire conversation among friends sharing our mutual parenting struggles. But all of them come from the fray, and all of them are much more scuffed up by failure than they are polished up by success.

I find I am drawn to write about things I struggle with, and habits of the household are no different. I'm qualified to write about this stuff not because I'm so good at it, I'm qualified to write about this stuff because I need it so badly.

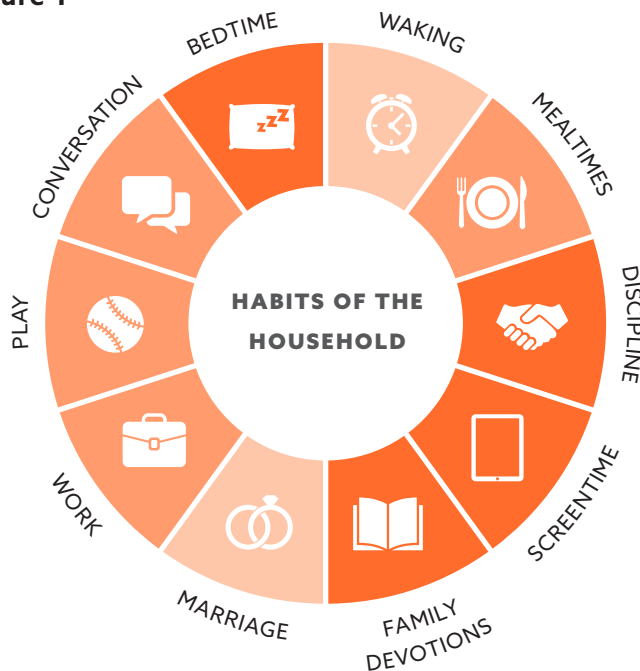
How This Book Is Structured

One of the central themes of this book is that we become our habits, and our kids become us. Which means who our children are becoming is tightly connected to who we are becoming—personally and communally. For that reason, when we think about Christian formation in a household, we are thinking in

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at least three directions: forming parents, forming children, and forming a family. As you can see in figure 1, the chapters will unfold in habits that might occur throughout a day, but each habit will have an emphasis on forming parents, children, or families.

Figure 1



FORMING PARENTS

FORMING CHILDREN

FORMING FAMILIES

Forming Parents

Parenting your children is not just about what you are doing in their lives. It is first about the work God is doing in your life. This means the starting point of parenting habits is thinking about how our household habits are forming us as parents. We can't make disciples without being disciples. We can't teach the grace of God outside of experiencing the grace of God.

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So some of these chapters—habits of waking or habits of marriage, for example—will be directed at you. These habits remind me that I can't be a good father if I'm not a good husband. I can't be a committed father if I'm not a committed disciple. There is a certain primacy to these habits. I've placed them at the beginning and middle of the book to serve as weights to balance the content. We need spiritual rhythms to become the kind of people God calls us to be before we can think about the kind of parents God calls us to be.

Forming Children

I feel a certain awe when I am surrounded by children. Whether this is playing in the back yard with the neighborhood kids or sitting at the dinner table with my sons, I sometimes suddenly remember that we parents get the fearsome and awesome opportunity to shape human beings. Sometimes this makes me cry, because I want so badly to protect them all and I know I can't. Sometimes it makes me proud, because I feel I have the most important job in the world. Other times I don't even know where to start, because it is such an overwhelming responsibility. I think all of these responses have a place. Forming children is wonderful, scary, and altogether too much, which is why we need help.

After the habits of forming parents, half of the remaining habits are about forming children. These chapters focus on the areas where we get to pick the routines that shape our children: bedtimes, moments of discipline, screentime, and family devotions. There is a real practicality and primacy to these habits, because so much of our day-to-day is concerned with them. For that reason, you'll notice that these chapters contain a bit more depth and length.

Forming Families

Finally, at the intersection of forming parents and forming children is family culture. This is the idea that when we come together, something unique happens—a household is born. These chapters will be about habits that focus on communal formation—things like mealtimes, conversations, and times of work and play.

You will notice an outward nature to these habits. These are the places where the household begins to move out into the world, or in some cases, where the household invites the world in. For example, one way to think about family culture is to think about what habits and norms our friends and neighbors are invited into when they come over. Another way to think about family culture is what we send out into the world when we befriend others and do our work in the world. In both senses, these habits of forming families look beyond the doorstep of the household and peer out into the world of loving neighbors and being a light to the world.

The Spirituality of Domestic Life

In real life, forming parents, forming children, and forming families all blend during a typical day. For that reason, the order of these chapters will unfold not categorically but rather as a day might. We will begin with morning and end with bedtime. In between we'll look at work and play and meals and discipline. Feel free to skip to a chapter that interests you, because each of them stands alone. However, you will find that if you take them in order, the themes build on each other.

In following the ordinary pace of a day, I hope to draw your attention over and over to one of the other central themes of this book: *that the greatest spiritual work happens in the normal moments of domestic life.*

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On the one hand, I hope you find this encouraging. Realizing that the normal moments of life are also the most spiritual moments of life helps give a validity and dignity to the otherwise mundane and repetitive nature of housework and parenting. I know we parents constantly wonder whether all of this matters, and I will try to assure you over and over: yes, it does! Your work in the household and parenting matters tremendously. It will echo into eternity.

But on the other hand, this is challenging because it reminds us of why parenting is so very, very hard. Parenting, seen properly, is an unceasing spiritual battle. A battle that God is using to refine us, and a battle that God will win for us, but if it feels like a fight to you, that's because it is.

When you are at home with children, you are in a spiritual realm that would make even the most zealous monastics jealous. One of the famous contemplative writers of the twentieth century, Carlo Carretto, spent years and years in the Sahara Desert, seeking God in a life of prayer and solitude. Later he admitted that he felt his mother, who spent thirty years raising children, was much more contemplative (and much less selfish!) than he was.¹ I don't find this surprising at all. As author Ruth Chou Simons so wonderfully puts it, "motherhood is sanctifying." I can only smile and add, so is fatherhood.

So in the end, reframing the household as the school of love where the most important spiritual work happens should be both challenging and comforting, because an implicit claim is that we don't have to retreat to the mountain tops or solitary edges of human experience to meet God and serve him. Rather, we find God and his mission at the center of loud families.²

1. Quoted in Ronald Rolheiser, *Domestic Monastery* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019).

2. For a fascinating and surprisingly beautiful book on seeking families as the place

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Finally, all things spiritual must eventually become practical. So while I have tried to root the beginning of each chapter in good theology, I try to end each chapter where good theology is supposed to lead us—good practice.

At the end of each chapter, you will find the key habits summarized and pulled together on one page. This is not only so you can be reminded of them but also so you can find them easily as you (I hope) go back and try them out.

A Note on Age and Adaptation

One of the things that writing from the trenches means is that while the themes and the habits are applicable to children of all ages, my examples will naturally tend toward younger children. I will draw on childhood and my own coming of age to speak toward adolescents and teens, but most of my parenting experience is in the younger years. So while you will notice that, you will also notice that as the book progresses, I will acknowledge the movement of time and speak more and more to the aging of our children. By the time we get to the epilogue, we'll be imagining us all old together.

Another thing to note is that I write from a fairly traditional family. I am so grateful that Lauren and I have a strong marriage and healthy children, but I am also aware that many people—including some of my friends, colleagues, and neighbors—do not. I want to acknowledge that with compassion and empathy. Depending on where you are, you may read sections or habits wondering how this applies to your different family situation. I have decided that it is wiser to let you make that application than

of spiritual formation, rather than seeking solitude and retreats, see Ernest Boyer Jr., *Finding God at Home: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

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to imagine that I can do it for you. When you read the chapter on marriage, you may desperately wish you had one. Or when you read the chapter on play, you may painfully wish your child were healthy enough to romp around. I can affirm that, nonetheless, the Christian themes of covenant love (in marriage) and healthy imaginations (in play) are applicable to all of us broken people, no matter our broken family situations. But I will not be so presumptuous as to apply it to your situation; I will let you do so. So at the end of each chapter, you will see a note on adaptation, encouraging you to do just that.

But no matter the ages of our children or the structures of our families, we can all relate on one thing—our brokenness as parents. We are all in need of grace and love, and that, you will find, over and over, is the main theme.

So Remember, Love Is at the Root of Everything

“Love is at the root of everything—all learning, all parenting, all relationships—love or the lack of it. And what we hear or see on the screen is part of who we become.”

I love this quote in part because it is from an unexpected source: Mr. Rogers, the TV personality who was better known for asking, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” But as you may know, Fred Rogers was a seminary-educated minister and follower of Jesus who saw himself as a missionary to television.³ And even more, as someone who felt called to minister to children, he was radically attuned to the redemptive power of habit in children’s lives. (Unsurprising if you recall his famous way of taking off his jacket and shoes every single show.)

3. See the 2018 documentary on Fred Rogers by Morgan Neville, *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*

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But mostly I love this quote by Fred Rogers because it reminds me, over and over, that the motivating concern for all this talk about habits and caring for children is love.

You will, inevitably, at times while reading this book be tempted to wonder, “Isn’t this legalistic? Isn’t it the power of God that changes us, not the power of our habits?” I will try to remind you that no, it is not legalistic. And yes, it is the power of God that changes us, habits included.

I will call your attention to this over and over not so much because I want to defend my stance but because it is opportunity to remind you over and over of the message of God’s grace.

Caring about how habits are shaping your family is not legalistic. What would be legalistic is saying that God loves you more because of your habits. Or that you can earn your salvation by picking the right habits. You can’t. And thank God, you don’t need to!

The good news of Christianity is that Jesus’ death on the cross has paid for all of our failures (including our bad parenting habits), and his resurrection from the grave is the promise of a new life (including new parenting habits). It is that work of God that saves us, by grace and through faith—not our works (of habits or otherwise).⁴ That God died for us while we were still sinners is a demonstration of his great love,⁵ and that love is why we care about habits.

So as I will remind you at the end of every chapter, our habits won’t change God’s love for us, but God’s love for us can and should change our habits.

So in light of his grace and love, let us begin.

4. Eph. 2:8–10.

5. Rom. 5:8.