



Chapter 2

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AT HOME

What do we mean by the phrase “spiritual formation,” and what does it have to do with home?

The Scriptures tell us that men and women were created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). In other words, we were made as icons to reflect our Creator, just like children resemble their parents.

Unfortunately, our original parents fell into a disease called sin which changed everything. You might say we became willing accomplices in our own spiritual *de-formation*. Every one of us is born as something less than we were intended to be, damaged versions of our original design. That’s why God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, providing the means for and initiating the process of restoring us to our original purpose.

Put simply, spiritual formation is the process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. Our spirits, and therefore our entire beings, need to be “re-formed.” Think of a sculptor keeping his eye on a human model as he gradually transforms a chunk of marble into a statue. The same process takes place in our lives. We are called to keep our eye on the model, Jesus Christ, and to submit to the Divine Artist as He gradually forms us into the masterpieces we were created to become.

How does this “re-forming” occur? It can happen when we spend time alone with God through solitude, prayer, fasting, and other contemplative habits. It also takes place during corporate worship or when we imitate Christ by caring for the poor and loving our neighbors. Most of us associate these kinds of practices with spiritual formation, and God does mold us through such routines. But they are not the primary context of our spiritual formation.

I can learn about Jesus when I read the Bible and feel close to Jesus when I pray. But I *become* like Jesus (spiritually formed) when I give my life to a spouse, a child, a grandchild, and others whom God places in my home. These are the specific people for whom I am called to turn the Word into flesh amid the day-in and day-out reality of life.

It is much easier to sit in church listening to a sermon than to bite my tongue during an argument with my wife. The first nourishes my spirit. The second humbles my pride.

I love listening to worship music and reading inspirational books. I hate apologizing to my children after losing my temper. The first reminds me who God is. The second reminds me who I am, a sinner in need of repentance.

Spiritual formation occurs most effectively in those moments when I obediently submit to the Sculptor’s chisel and follow the apostle Paul’s admonishment to become like the One who “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a

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servant, being made in human likeness. . . . [H]e humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7–8).

In short, my marriage and family are the first and primary contexts within which I am called to be like Jesus in the lives of others.

Most of this book outlines principles and practices that can help you make spiritual formation real in your marriage and with your children or grandchildren. Before developing an action plan, however, we thought it important to clarify the destination, to envision the end before determining the means. How, exactly, do we define success when it comes to spiritual formation at home?

I often ask groups of adults to tell me the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word “success.” As you might imagine, I receive a wide range of answers such as “achievement” and “money” and “happiness” and “status”—each person replying based upon what they or their culture consider important. I then hold up a hammer and ask, “What is success for this hammer?” Amazingly, everyone gives essentially the same answer, “Driving nails into wood.” Next, I show them a pen. “What is success?” “To write.” Why is it so easy for us to define success for a hammer and a pen? Because we judge success for such objects straightforwardly as “fulfilling the purpose for which they were made.”

Defining success for marriage and family requires the same criteria. Marriage, parenthood, and grandparenthood were designed for a particular purpose. As with the hammer and the pen, we need to ask ourselves, “What did the Creator have in mind when He made these things and how does that purpose clarify their success?”

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN MARRIAGE

Traditional wedding vows include a sacred oath. They recognize that every marriage, as designed by the original Matchmaker, is intended to reflect a much bigger reality than joint checking accounts and shared household chores. Consider the following words that have opened millions of weddings over the past few centuries: “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and his Church. . . .”⁵

A mystical union? Christ and His Church? Heavy stuff. But a good reminder that giving ourselves to one another in marriage is a picture of what our Lord did when He gave himself to us.

Relatively few in this generation realize that marriage is about more than two people finding happiness in this life. It is designed to serve as a picture of that eternal “happily ever after” between God and His beloved bride, the church. Therefore, we can define the target of spiritual formation in marriage as follows:

Marital Success: Every marriage is intended to be a picture of the marriage between God and His people as we selflessly give ourselves to another through mutual submission and loving intimacy (Ephesians 5:31–33).

When we exchange rings we promise to become part of a story much bigger than the subplots of our individual lives.

When we snap wedding photos we record a union that is intended to become a picture of the union between God and His beloved people.

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We promise to remain faithful and devoted to one another “till death do us part” not just because lifelong marriage is the best path to lasting health and happiness. We do so because, in God’s eyes, the two of us cease to exist as autonomous individuals with separate identities and agendas. We become one.

Sadly, those who abandon their vows damage more than their own hearts. They also destroy the beautiful masterpiece that every marriage is intended to reveal to the next generation.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN PARENTING

Did you know that traditional wedding vows list parenthood as one of the primary purposes for which matrimony was ordained? To quote: “[I]t was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.”⁶ From the earliest days of the church the Christian faith has upheld marriage and parenthood as central to God’s purpose for humanity. So we must ask: If parenthood is part of our purpose, then what is the purpose of parenthood?

In short, God designed the home as the primary place that children receive spiritual instruction and, as we discussed earlier, experience the tangible embodiment of spiritual realities. So we define the target of spiritual formation in parenting and grandparenting as follows:

Parenting Success: Those blessed with the gift of children and grandchildren are called to inspire and nurture Christian faith and godly character in the next generation as life’s highest calling (Deuteronomy 6:6–9, Psalm 78:1–8).

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Real success can only be achieved through discipline. That's why the Christian tradition has a long history of emphasizing what have been called "spiritual disciplines." Spiritual formation at home is a little-by-little, long-term process rather than a one-time event. We cannot overemphasize the importance of this point for parents and grandparents.

Anyone who has ever tried to teach a young child to ride a bike understands this principle. It would be crazy to place your three-year-old daughter on an adult bike and give her a shove down the driveway. No matter how much you cheer "You can do it!" she will crash and cry within a matter of seconds. Instead, you buy her a small bicycle with training wheels so she can get the feel for riding in safety. Once she's gained confidence you will likely remove the training wheels. But you still run alongside or behind her, letting go of the seat only a few seconds at a time and allowing her to take a few harmless falls onto the grass. Not until you feel she has had enough experience within the relative safety of your guidance do you relinquish control to her wobbly instincts.

We need to apply this same perspective to a child's spiritual formation. Our goal is much bigger than getting our sons and daughters to pray a one-time prayer of salvation. As important as it is to guide our children through that step when they are ready, the job is by no means complete. They have only begun the wobbly ride of lifelong faith. God intends moms, dads, grandpas, and grandmas to consistently guide children toward their God-intended purpose of becoming like Christ. A large part of that process, as we will discover, is to nurture a bias toward right belief and to help them acquire a taste for right character—both of which require patient, diligent, intentional effort over the long haul.

Hammers, pens, and families all have a clear definition of

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success, which is to fulfill the purpose for which they were made. That's why we define spiritual formation at home as the process of intentionally fulfilling the God-ordained purposes of marriage and family life.

WHAT STARTS AT HOME?

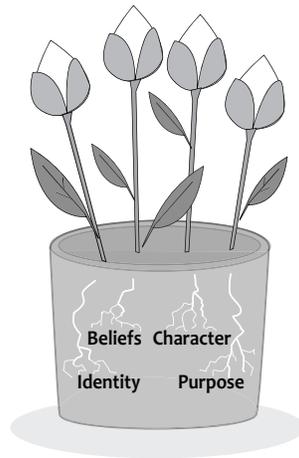
Spiritual formation begins at home, but it does not end there. The home cannot be the church any more than the church can be the home. Christianity is a communal faith to be experienced through corporate worship, under pastoral leadership and amid what many call "doing life" with other believers. God never intended a family's faith to occur apart from local church engagement. But neither did He design the church to replace the home. Left to do the entire job by itself, a church can only impart enough of the faith to inoculate kids against taking it seriously. Church and home, like a watering can and the soil in a flower pot, are both essential to the job.

So why the title *It Starts At Home*? Because what happens at home sets the course for all that follows, for better or worse. Anyone who has come to faith later in life knows the importance of sorting through the good and bad of what they learned and experienced while growing up. That process often requires replacing flawed lenses with clarifying truth. It also involves the hard work of breaking bad habits and learning disciplines that would have been much easier to master during the pliable years of childhood. Tiger Woods is Tiger Woods because he started the disciplines of golf at a very young age under the guidance of a highly intentional dad. In a similar manner, spiritual formation at home is the most natural and productive context for faith and character formation because the longer one aligns his or her life with the truth, the more

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“second nature” it becomes to believe and behave according to God’s design.

So what, precisely, starts at home? There are four roots to lifelong faith that grow best in the rich soil of family life.



Root One: Beliefs

We live in a manner consistent with what we believe to be true, whether or not those beliefs align with reality. Our foundational beliefs about God, ourselves, and the world around us take shape in the context of the home.

Root Two: Identity

Little boys were made to become responsible, self-sacrificial men. Little girls were created to become godly, selfless women. These identities must be modeled and affirmed to counter the sexual confusion rampant in our day. We all need to see and experience what it means to be made in God’s image as a male or a female, a process heavily dependent upon the model and influence of a godly marriage.

Spiritual Formation at Home 35***Root Three: Character***

The habits we form and foster at home determine our character; they make it easy or difficult to do the right thing. The root of the word *virtue* means to make second nature behaviors that do not come naturally. (Remember Tiger Woods?) Little by little we climb uphill to become the person we were created to be. Nothing influences that process more than how diligent or delinquent parents are about modeling and reinforcing godly character.

Root Four: Purpose

Every person must be given a clear sense of purpose in life, a definition of success. Believers for generations have learned from the Westminster Shorter Catechism that “[m]an’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” King Solomon wrote, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NKJV). If we don’t clarify the purpose of life for the next generation, then “the world, the flesh, and the devil” will be more than happy to fill in the blank.

Every home fosters a culture that moves us toward or away from right beliefs, a healthy identity, good habits, and a clear purpose. Our goal for the remainder of this book is to inspire and equip you to instill all four in an intentional rather than haphazard manner.

LEADERSHIP

Another thing that starts at home is leadership. The Scriptures certainly describe leadership that way, especially when it comes to determining who is and is not qualified to lead in the context of the local church. From the earliest days of Christianity, leaders have been called upon to fill a variety of job

descriptions, including teachers, deacons, pastors, and elders. The skills and abilities needed for each role vary depending upon the assignment. But every “applicant” has to demonstrate the capacity to lead. How? By earning a reputation as one who has effectively led at home.

Consider the job qualifications detailed by the apostle Paul in letters written to a couple of first-century hiring supervisors. Timothy and Titus were both trying to appoint church leaders. Paul listed several items every applicant’s resume had to include, such as being “the husband of one wife” and “rul[ing] his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence” (1 Timothy 3:2–4, NKJV).

Why? Because, in Paul’s words, “if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Timothy 3:5, NKJV).

Paul even told Pastor Timothy to meddle in marriages by expecting leaders’ wives to be “reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things” (1 Timothy 3:11, NKJV).

Did the early church actually hold husbands and wives accountable for the behavior of their spouses? Not exactly. It did, however, understand the home as the primary context for spiritual formation. The church wanted leaders who could model with integrity God’s intent for marriage and family life. Great leaders embody, not merely teach, what they believe.

As we understand these passages, Paul recognized that “two become one” when married and that both enter into a leadership role as a single, united team. Both man and wife were expected to model godly character and to uphold the priority of home if either was going to effectively lead.

A bit extreme? Not really. If McDonalds requires employees to wear uniforms before they can sell burgers, isn’t it reasonable to expect those leading Christ’s bride to model the beauty of marriage?

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Raising the bar further still, Paul advised Titus to seek those who had “faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination” (Titus 1:6, NKJV). So not only were husband and wife taken as a single unit, the kids also got lumped into the “qualifications” package.

It is important to say that God’s grace is the epicenter of the gospel. The early church did not expect a solid home in order to alienate or condemn those with imperfect families. Quite the opposite. They wanted to redeem troubled homes.

How would an orphaned world understand a loving heavenly Father if they never saw an earthly father laying down his life for his wife and children? How could they grasp what it meant to be the pure bride of Christ if they’d only known the mutual shame of temple prostitution? Church leadership meant more than describing the gospel. It also meant allowing the Word to become flesh and blood in the context of one’s marriage and family, in the process restoring a lost masterpiece intended to reveal the very heart and character of God. No wonder the primary qualification for leading at church was leading well at home.

We can take a lesson from the early church. They understood something we too quickly forget, that leading at home is an essential means of maturing and refining men and women for wider influence. Home is the first and most consistent context in which we prove ourselves worthy and make ourselves ready. That’s why we call leading at home the proving ground of success.

ONE HUNDRED AND
TWENTY DAYS TO SUCCESS

When it comes to nurturing lifelong faith every one of us is a mere one hundred and twenty days from success. No, we

won't reach the ultimate goal of becoming like Christ or launching our children and grandchildren as fully devoted followers of Jesus in that time. But we can take three simple steps that will move our families toward fulfilling their God-intended purpose as nurseries of spiritual formation, allowing the life-giving water of the gospel to nurture roots planted in the rich soil of home.

Step One: A Clear Purpose. Clarify the definition of success for your specific family by understanding your God-ordained purpose and goal.

Step Two: An Effective Strategy. Understand the principles and practices that increase your odds of success.

Step Three: A Simple Plan. Decide what specific things you will do in the next 120 days to move your family to the next level.

In the rest of this book we will walk you through these three steps as it relates to married couples, parents, grandparents, and leaders. The section for parents is by far the longest section because giving the next generation a strong spiritual heritage is the end game of the entire process. Those with kids at home are in the “heavy lifting” season, so we felt it important to provide them the most encouragement and ideas.

Thank you for taking the first steps toward achieving excellence in nurturing lifelong faith among those you love and lead. We hope you find the following pages helpful as you start a process that can only begin at home.