



Good Intentions Gone Bad: Our Overextended Families

Over the past 18 years I have asked every family I've seen in therapy how often they eat together. One father replied, "We're all very busy, but we try our hardest to eat together at least once a week, on Sunday." More probing questions about the family's weekly schedule revealed that there were other times during the week that everyone was home at the same time. For a moment, I sat there puzzled. "What's happening those other times?" I asked. "Well . . . I grab my food and go to my room, my brother goes into the basement to eat and play video games, and mom and dad sometimes sit at the table by themselves," one of the teenagers replied.

After all these years of listening to families describe their "crazy" schedules, I see a growing trend that appears to be pushing Orthodox Christian families further away from each other and from God—a trend that is hurting our relationships with our family members and our relationship with God.

God's Commandments

"You shall have no other gods before me."

"You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . you shall not bow down to them nor serve them."

God's first and second commandments challenge us to look more deeply at distinguishing how we fail in our attempt to love God and how we might fall into the trap of idol worship. In *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus*, the elder says:

When we see an object that attracts us, we easily become attached to it . . . If this lasts for a length of time, then this object becomes our idol [. . .] which takes the place in our heart that belongs to God.

Though we might replace God with idols, God does not change His love for us nor His desire for us to come closer to Him. Remember how the lawyer answered Christ's question on the means of acquiring salvation? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" Christ's response was simple and clear, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live" (Luke 10:27-28).

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

As Christians, our day of rest and devotion to God is Sunday. However, over the last decade, more and more activities have been scheduled on this important day, even in the mornings. This makes it very difficult for parents to say "no" to their child and teach them the importance of attending church. (An even more sad and difficult situation is when a parent has to work on Sundays.) I remember when the only things open on Sunday were church and a few restaurants. You couldn't even get gasoline for your car! Boy, how times have changed—but who changed and why? Have we forgotten the importance of worshiping God as a family?

One of my favorite examples of the significance of family worship comes from the Book of Acts:



“Cornelius, . . . a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. . . .he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius . . . Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God’”

Here, the angel of God is confirming Cornelius and his family’s commitment to God by being obedient, prayerful and charitable. But how can *we* commit our lives to God if we are too busy? How can we become devout like Cornelius when there is not a free moment in our daily lives?

In an intriguing story called “Satan’s Convention,” an unknown author tells how Satan directs his dark angels to lure Christians away from God. Satan says, “Distract them from gaining hold of their Savior and maintaining that vital connection throughout their day!” “How shall we do this?” shouted his angels. “Keep them busy in the nonessentials of life and invent innumerable schemes to occupy their minds,” he answered. We must be vigilant and recognize that the devil is relentless in his pursuit to pull us away from God.

Righting the Wrong

For many cultures, including the Greek culture, well-rounded education and life experiences (activities) seem reasonable for future success—until they (rather their schedules) begin to choke the life (time) out of families and their worship of God. Providing our children with all the material comforts surely helps them enjoy *this life* more. But in order to provide our children with all of those comforts, we work even harder and spend more time away from our loved ones and God. We convince ourselves, or should I say, deceive ourselves, into believing that our efforts have good intentions.

Let’s stop for a moment and ask, why? Why do we let getting into college become more important than getting into heaven? Why do we let making money take priority over making time for God? We’re feeding their minds and bodies, but are we feeding their souls?

Over the years many parents have told me they were surprised their children did not resist attending family therapy. I have found that children welcome the time the whole family spends together in the office without any interruptions. Children and parents begin to value true “family time,” even in small amounts, and to resist the distractions that surround them. When families seek therapy, their “good intentions” are to remedy the conflict they are experiencing in their homes. Their struggle is to right the “wrong”—the busy lifestyle that is pulling them apart.

If we put God first, for ourselves and for our family, we too can receive the blessings from above. However, this does require change and faith. My challenge to all families is to consider a few adjustments at home:

- Spend quality family time with cell phones, televisions, and games turned off.
- Carve out time for family devotions, spiritual reading and preparing for church.
- Break bread together. As much as possible, make it a point to gather around the family table and share a meal and, by doing that, you will surely come a little closer to each other and to God.



To that end, St. John Chrysostom is very clear about what the bottom line is and how to make sure that our good intentions do not go bad:

We are so concerned with our children's schooling [and worldly success]; if only we were equally zealous in bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord... This, then, is our task: to educate both ourselves and our children in godliness; otherwise what answer will we have before Christ's judgment-seat?

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