

Create a Christmas that Strengthens Your Family

Introduction: This Christmas is going to be tough for millions of families. We are in the midst of the greatest downturn in the economy since the Great Depression. Some are even talking about the dreaded “R” word: *recession*. Families are watching their retirement accounts plummet, their checking accounts dwindle, and their children’s college funds fade away. Many of us are worried about the future. In a time of so much economic uncertainty what should we do? Where should we turn? What should our focus be?

It is probably safe to say that our kids have never experienced hard financial times quite like this. With all that’s happening around us there is certainly going to be less under the tree this year—for some of us a lot less. It will probably be the first time that some of our children have experienced a lean Christmas. We all have mixed feelings in the after-days of Christmas concerning how much emphasis is placed on material things. In fact, normally we may feel guilty about spending so much, but this Christmas is likely to be very different as we look for ways to make Christmas meaningful without all the “stuff.” The truth is, in some ways troubling financial times cause us to reevaluate our priorities and force us to focus on what really matters. I want us to do just that for the next few weeks as we talk about how to create a meaningful Christmas that focuses on what matters most.

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Today we are going to talk about how to create a Christmas that strengthens your family. Next week we will talk about how to create a Christmas that serves the community. Then, on Christmas Sunday we will talk about creating a Christmas that shapes your spirit.

So today, how do we create a Christmas, in the midst of financial upheaval, that **strengthens your family**? I believe we can create a Christmas that's better than the most lavish Christmas you've ever had by doing three things that really matter. They all require a time investment, not a financial investment:

1. Take the time to BLESS YOUR FAMILY.
2. Take the time to TEACH YOUR FAMILY.
3. Take the time to DREAM WITH YOUR FAMILY.

1. TAKE THE TIME TO BLESS YOUR FAMILY

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff" (Hebrews 11:20,21).

Set aside time this Christmas to bless your children. The word "blessing" in the Bible is where we get our English word "eulogy" which means "to speak well of". Take time to speak into their lives and express your faith in them and your dreams for them. Speak to them about the future and your belief that they will do great things with the life God has given them.

Gary Smalley, author of *The Blessing*, says we give the blessing to our children in five ways:

1. By meaningful touch.

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2. By a spoken message.
3. By attaching high value to the one being blessed.
4. By picturing a special future for the one being blessed.
5. By an active commitment to fulfill the blessing.

The blessing in the Scripture is a spiritual tool, giving hope to a child for the future. Are you giving your children hope, through the words you speak to them for their personal future? Do they know you love them and appreciate them? This cannot be communicated by providing them with things. It can only be given by spending time with your children, telling them you love them, that they are important to you.

To a Jewish child, failure to gain the blessing was a very serious loss (Genesis 27:27-29). The same is true of your children. They want your approval and blessing more than anything else in the world. The pastor's approval, the teacher's acceptance, their friends' esteem, is unimportant in comparison to their desire for your approval.

Your children need your touch to believe they are of value to you and God. Recently, I saw a news program which showed volunteers that go to hospitals just to spend time holding "crack" babies and babies infected with HIV and AIDS. These babies, abandoned by their mothers, could not survive without the tender touch of a loving adult. Holding, hugging, kissing, tickling, and expressing love in general through touch is necessary for any child, no matter the age.

A man in my church shared with me that he could not recall his father ever touching him even once or speaking approvingly of him ever. Another man shared with me with tears in his eyes, "The only time I ever remember my dad liking me was when I

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passed him on the stairs and he patted me on the head.” What a tragedy! Their fathers failed to give them the blessing.

My mother was always hugging us, kissing us, tickling us; and she was always, always, always there whenever one of us six kids needed her. She was our stability, our rock. We all loved her very much because she made a big difference in our lives.

I’ll never forget the time when, as a teenager, I got into a fight. This fight got me into serious trouble and my dad found out. My dad and I had been “round and round” many times (that’s what I called getting a spanking because my dad would grab one arm and we would try to run as he spanked us. So we just went in circles, “round and round.”). Well, I went into the basement with my dad and I knew I was going to get the worst spanking I ever had. I was scared breathless. But to my shock, my dad didn’t spank me at all. He broke down and wept bitterly and told me he was disappointed with me. He told me he had pictured a much better life for me than this. I was heartbroken that I had hurt him so deeply. That day I realized the deep affection and love my father had for me. I am so glad he decided to be transparent that day. I’m so glad he told me he loved me and cared for me. He gave me the blessing and has many times since.

I am much older now and my parents’ approval is still important to me and always will be. About ten years ago, the phone rang at 8:00 on a Sunday morning. It was my mother. She asked me if everything was okay. I said that it was and asked her why she asked. She said, “I just got up and found your dad praying on the floor, on his face for you and your family in the bathroom. He’s been there since about 4:00 a.m.” My mom and dad are still giving the blessing.

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You won't have your children long. They will be out of the house all too soon. Love them, bless them, and hold them while you can. Life is too short. Let me illustrate:

There we were, Gloria and I, sitting in the Steak Loft Restaurant in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut. We had dropped our son Tom off at college the day before and had been crying ever since. Leaving him there was one of the hardest things we had ever done. He was our firstborn. We were very close and felt like part of ourselves had been ripped away from us. Tom is 6'4" and 220 pounds, but the day we left him outside his dorm 1100 miles away, he still felt like our baby boy. All three of us stood hugging and crying, desperately trying to separate ourselves.

Gloria and I decided to have a good meal on the way home, but what happened there could not have been predicted. The hostess sat us next to the table of a young couple with three small children, two boys and a girl, just like ours. As we watched them, we thought of how quickly Tommy had grown up. It seemed so fast. We recalled the time Tommy had traveled with us to see his grandparents in Michigan. He was two years old. We remembered him saying, "Dad, we can't stay overnight. We forgot our Cheerios." He didn't think you could stay anywhere without Cheerios.

Well, it was all too much. Gloria began to weep. I'm sure people walking by thought we were fighting or that the food was really horrible. Gloria had to go to the ladies room to compose herself. When she got there, the woman with the three children came in. Gloria cried with her and told her to love her kids, because you don't get these times back; they grow up so fast. While Gloria was gone, the lump that had lodged in my throat during the last thousand miles of driving came loose. I began to cry in my salad.

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You won't have your kids long. Take time this Christmas to sit down with them and speak your blessing into their lives. Verbally give them your love and approval. They will remember it.

2. TAKE THE TIME TO TEACH THEM

“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up”
(Deuteronomy 6:6,7).

Christmas is a great time to teach our kids the values that they will need to be a success in life. Speaking truth into their lives is far more valuable than one more toy or one more copy of the latest fashion that will be discarded in a few months. Real values that are impressed upon young lives don't wear out and they never get discarded.

Protecting your children from the outside world is a must in our wicked society; yet it is more difficult than we may first think. Don Adams points out in his book *The Child Influencers* that the influences upon our children today are drastically different from 200 years ago. Two centuries ago the most important influences on a child's life were reading, parents and family-based learning. Today, in stark contrast, the three most dominant pressures upon a child's life are school, peers, and television.

The average child today watches about 27 hours of TV in one week. Over the course of a year, children spend more time watching TV than they spend in school or participating in any other activity besides sleep. The average American child will have watched 100,000 acts of televised violence, including 8,000 murders, by the time he or she finishes sixth grade. Compare those statistics to the fact that the average father spends 8 to 14 minutes a day communicating with his children and you can see a problem. If you