



Making a Family Covenant

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. (Gen. 17:7)

We have a covenant-making God – not because it is necessary for **Him** to define His bond with mankind, but because it is necessary for **us**. Our marriages are also covenants, agreements between a husband and wife to become a loving team. We put words to that covenant and seal it in a ceremony, asking God to bless our promises. As parents, we inherently ‘covenant’ with our whole family to walk together through life, to promote certain values and to treat one another with understanding and respect. A great way to seal those implicit promises is by writing a ‘family covenant.’ This handout will guide you through the process, but it also takes work and relationship-building time with your own family. If you invest those things, you will certainly be blessed – you and your offspring after you!

Preparation

- Decide **who will participate** in making a family covenant. If you are married, then both husband and wife will participate by default. If you have children, decide which ones might be old enough and whether you want to make your covenant simple enough for the younger ones to have some input. If you have extended family living with you, consider whether they are invited to speak to the values and priorities in your home.
- Set aside some **special time** for working on your covenant. If you have children participating, it will need to be in shorter, more frequent intervals. If not, then you might even want to spend a whole ‘retreat’ day working on it. Get a babysitter, silence your phones and otherwise limit outside interruptions.
- **Pray** about the agreement you want to make and spend some preparation time meditating on your important values and strategies. Read this handout all the way through before you sit down together. And then read it out loud together before you begin.

Step One – Family Priorities

Your first goal will be to agree upon the major, foundational priorities you want to use as your standards for building your family. Try to come up with three to five values, such as “honest communication,” “faith,” “quality education,” “giving to others” or “respectful attitudes.” You will flesh these priorities out in later stages, and they might even change along the way, but do your best **to identify the guiding principles you want as a basis for the life of your family**. As in all the steps below, this will be a cooperative effort, allowing every participant to speak their views, even when those cannot be included in the final draft. Affirm others’ values and goals; be willing to listen; be humble in responding. Do not include a priority unless everyone can get behind it. That may mean wording it differently or sleeping on it or acknowledging that your personal priority is not an overall family priority. If you come up with more than five, that is OK, but try to at least identify a minimum of three.

Step Two – Long-Term Goals (Optional)

Setting long-term goals for your family is a great idea. You know the old saying, “If you aim at nothing, you are sure to hit it!” However, if you only have the time and the energy to set your Family Priorities and Specific Strategies, then you can skip this step and the next one. Long-term goals are those which extend more than 5 years out. Sometimes educational or financial goals (college for children or retirement for adults) fall into this category. But transitioning to the mission field or starting a business or enabling one spouse to stay home with the children might belong here, too. As you set long- and short-term goals, ***ask yourselves whether they fit with the priorities you have already established.*** If they do not, then revise either your Family Priorities or your goals. Family resources of all kinds will be devoted to your priorities, so for these goals to have traction, they need to be part of that big picture. Goals should also be things you can actually control. For example, “Get elected to City Council” is not something you can control, but “Run for City Council” is. Get excited about these things – you are casting a vision for your life and the life of your family.

Step Three – Short-Term Goals (Optional)

Again, if you do not have the time or energy to complete this step, you can skip it – but you will miss some great conversations if you do! Short-term goals are those which can be accomplished in less than 5 years. Finishing grad school, visiting the Grand Canyon, adopting a child or becoming a church elder might fit here. Keep in mind that even where these read like individual goals, ***the whole family is committing to support and encourage them.*** Of course, that doesn’t mean these goals, like everything else in your Family Covenant, can’t be changed down the road in a future family meeting. Again, vet these goals to make sure they align with the Family Priorities you set above.

Step Four – Specific Strategies

This is an important step – you may not skip this one! Take a look, first of all, at your Family Priorities. Then reread your long- and short-term goals. What are the specific strategies you will use to accomplish those things? A savings plan, a family devotional time, a weekly date night or reading books together are some examples of strategies. These are not general principles, but ***activities and behaviors.*** Make sure they are realistic, specific and mutually agreed upon. Try to include at least one specific strategy for each goal (long- or short-term) and several strategies for each priority. Of course, these may overlap. It is a good idea to also agree on primary responsibility for these strategies. For example, if you are going to eat a family dinner at home twice a week, who will fix the meals, coordinate schedules, pick up the kids, etc.? You may want to place your specific strategies beneath the goal or priority they address, but if there is a lot of overlap, then you can include them in their own section at the end of your document. Make sure that one of your Specific Strategies is to review your Family Covenant regularly, whether you do that as part of weekly or monthly family meetings or whether you do that specially, once a year.

Step Five – Vision & Motto

Although not strictly necessary, it is really fun to create a serious vision statement (which you could calligraphy for your home) and/or a catchy motto (which you could print on business cards for every family member). Make sure these capture ***the essence of your Family Priorities***. Put the most creative members of your family to work on this – make it joyful!

Now What?

- Now that you've done the hard work of creating a Family Covenant document, what should you do with it? First of all, you should **sign it and date it**. Get everyone who worked on it to put their signature at the bottom. Maybe you could get a gold seal at a craft store to make it look official.
- Second, you should **post it**. If your document will fit on a legal sheet of paper, then you can have it printed and framed. If not, you could tack it to the refrigerator or put it on a sheet of poster board. The important thing is that it is accessible. Some families might like to make a collage frame with family photos or have their children write out the covenant in their handwriting. Think about other ways of bringing your values forward – putting your vision statement on your Christmas card or Facebook page, placing your Family Priorities by the front door or making placemats or coffee mugs out of them. Print your motto on T-shirts to wear to the beach. Again, make it playful and interesting.
- Perhaps most importantly, you should **USE IT**. That means referring to your priorities any time you have an important decision to make. That means putting things on the back burner which do not fit with your overall goals as a family. That means being faithful to your specific strategies. That means graciously referring to your posted agreements during times of conflict or discipline or accountability. That means celebrating the achievement of a goal or the special accomplishment of a Specific Strategy. That means talking about these things when you feel them slipping or changing.
- Finally, you should **revisit it**. Make a commitment to reconvene the family to discuss your covenant, including younger children as they grow up. Perhaps this could be the first order of business on your family vacation, or you could take a weekend at the beach at the same time each spring. You can, of course, discuss it much more often – some families have scheduled meetings each week or month – but the important thing is to reevaluate your Family Covenant on a regular basis, *at least* once a year.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

(Matt 5:14-15)