

≡ Come to the  
family table

Slowing down  
to enjoy food, each other,  
and JESUS

Ted & Amy  
Cunningham

Ted and Amy Cunningham have written the perfect antidote for the busyness of everyday modern life. *Come to the Family Table* provides encouraging devotionals, interesting questions, and recipes as a way to bind your family together over a meal. If you're looking for a way to increase the conversation and the laughter in your house, make sure this book makes its way onto your dinner table.

JÁNA GUYNN

Director of MarriedLife at North Point Community Church

Do yourself a favor and devour this book like you would your favorite meal. It's an amazing read! Thank you, Ted and Amy, for providing insight into family, love, relationships, food, fun, and laughter. You have filled these pages with great content, recipes, conversations starters, and devotions . . . it literally has it all. This book is an excellent tool for any family that wants to move in the direction of health. Thank you for blessing my family and our table time. This is a gift that will serve so many. Well done!

DOUG FIELDS

Pastor, author, and speaker

Ted and Amy Cunningham offer us a challenge to return to a time when "dinner time" was not just about quickly downing the food but about relaxing together as we connect with friends and family. *Come to the Family Table* is a must for every newlywed couple as they anticipate building a rich life together. Filled with creative ideas, recipes, and ways to foster discipleship and intimacy as a family, this book

invites readers to give attention to how they are nurturing those closest to them. Ted and Amy teach with ease that intentional hospitality—integrated with simplicity and love—is vital as we seek to leave a lasting footprint in the lives of those we invite into our homes.

DANA YEAKLEY

Author of *The Gentle Art of Discipling Women*

We all know food impacts the body. Ted and Amy Cunningham make a compelling and deeply personal argument that food can impact your family and even your soul. They will show you how gathering around the table as family and friends might not just be good for you—it might even heal you. This is a fascinating read.

CAREY NIEUWHOF

Author and founding/teaching pastor at Connexus Church

How thrilled would you be to find a \$1,000 bill under a napkin at your kitchen table? *Come to the Family Table* will fill you with warm feelings of belonging and help you build rich memories with your family. Consider this book permission and energy to enjoy what we should never have lost—joy around meals and hospitality that makes sharing Jesus way more natural. Our families deserve so much more than what they get in this hurried, food-for-fuel world. This book rocks when it comes to reviving hope, fun, and virtue in our busy families.

JEFF KEMP

Vice president of FamilyLife and author of *Facing the Blitz*

I loved this book! I felt welcomed to Ted and Amy's dinner table as they shared stories, advice, and ideas for a more vibrant and intentional way of doing family. If you want to connect more deeply with your kids, God, and your community, read this book!

SHANNON ETHRIDGE

Life/relationship coach and author of twenty-two books, including the bestselling *Every Woman's Battle* series

One of the highlights of our day is sitting down together as a family of six for dinner. With four boys, most meals are filled with energy, laughs, and loud noises, but not a lot of intentional conversation. *Come to the Family Table* by Ted and Amy Cunningham reminds us of the value of making memories and raising disciples together around our kitchen table. This book will help you transform the way you view the precious times you have together with your spouse, kids, friends, and family. In our fast-paced, go-go-go culture, *Come to the Family Table* will challenge the way you view food, meals, and even time with your family. The book is based on God's Word and is practical, creative, and ready to be applied!

SCOTT KEDERSHA

Director of premarital and newly married ministries at Watermark Community Church

If the kitchen is the center of the house, then the dinner table is the heart of the home. In *Come to the Family Table*, Ted and Amy Cunningham remind us that part of being a

healthy and intentional family is regularly gathering together for meals. Wise parents prioritize “table” opportunities to build into their children as well as reach out to others. *Come to the Family Table* presents a practical, biblical, intentional, and fun approach to loving your family and friends.

MICHAEL KAST

Family minister at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky

A simple book with a powerful message. Every family needs to come to the table. Ted has been a champion for marriage and family in the church for years. Now he brings it home to the family table. The book is a great blend of wisdom, stories, games, recipes, and simple tips to make deep connections with family and friends. It’s a book everyone can engage with—the kind you would want to take on a family road trip or read out loud around the fire on a holiday. I wish someone had encouraged me to spend more time at the family table when we were raising our kids.

GREG WEAVER

Director of development at FamilyLife

I highly recommend this book! The format is engaging and easy to follow. Each chapter has compelling and simple illustrations of ways to incorporate the family table into real life. Best of all, Ted and Amy speak to the heart, reinforcing what is good at home and stirring up what can be even better.

CHRISTINE DENTE

Singer/songwriter, Out of the Grey

Ted and Amy are two of my favorite foodie friends. There is probably no better way to experience community than around a common table. *Come to the Family Table* gives a very practical way to create intentional shared experiences with your family. This book is #DateNightWorks approved and will keep you and your family laughing and loving at every meal!

**TIM POPADIC**

President of DateNightWorks and creator of Date Night Comedy Tour



≡ Come to the  
family table

*Slowing down  
to enjoy food, each other,  
and JESUS*

**Ted & Amy Cunningham**

**NAVPRESS** 

A NavPress resource published in alliance  
with Tynedale House Publishers, Inc.



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

**For more information, visit [www.NavPress.com](http://www.NavPress.com).**

*Come to the Family Table: Slowing Down to Enjoy Food, Each Other, and Jesus*

Copyright © 2016 by Ted and Amy Cunningham. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAVPRESS and the NAVPRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

Cover photograph copyright © Alie Lengyelova/Stocksy. All rights reserved.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

Caitlyn Carlson, Acquiring Editor

Mark Anthony Lane II, Designer

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked NET are taken from the NET Bible,® copyright © 1996-2006 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. <http://netbible.com> All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible,® copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Cunningham, Ted, author.

Title: Come to the family table : slowing down to enjoy food, each other, and Jesus / Ted and Amy Cunningham.

Description: Colorado Springs : NavPress, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016019754 (print) | LCCN 2016015619 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631463679 (Apple) | ISBN 9781631463686 (E-Pub) | ISBN 9781631463693 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781631463662

Subjects: LCSH: Dinners and dining—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Families—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BR115.N87 (print) | LCC BR115.N87 C86 2016 (ebook) | DDC 249—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016019754>

Printed in the United States of America

22	21	20	19	18	17	16
7	6	5	4	3	2	1



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *xv*

Introduction *xvii*

## Part 1: The Family Table Is for Us

- CHAPTER 1 Space around the Table 3  
CHAPTER 2 A Place for Memories 21  
CHAPTER 3 Food, Wine, and God's Favor 41  
CHAPTER 4 Together, Wherever 57  
CHAPTER 5 The Family Constitution 81

## Part 2: The Family Table Is for Others

- CHAPTER 6 Hospitality at the Table 105  
CHAPTER 7 A Simple Table 125  
CHAPTER 8 A Lavish Table 139  
CHAPTER 9 Honoring Marriage at the Table 161  
CHAPTER 10 The Love Jug 183

Notes 199

Recipe Index 201



# Introduction

AMY

The year 2014 was heart changing for us. Our physical and nutritional depletion was finally becoming obvious to us, although it had been obvious to those around us for quite some time. Our souls were now exhausted, and it was time to make some changes. Ted and I had several emotional breakdowns and deep moments of discussion and prayer. After identifying our inevitable burnout, we knew everything had to be on the table—our calling, our ministry, our home, and the way we do life. The realization that we had a diminishing margin for relationships with others and one another made our hearts ache. Our family yearned for more. We had slid into this lonely place. But God intended us for relationship with him and others. Jesus said the most important thing we should do is love God and love other people (Mark 12:30-31). Both of these priorities are simply impossible without intentional margin in your life. Our family certainly does not have it all figured out now, but we

work hard to say no a lot and edit our schedules often. As a couple, we strive to decide our way into health and relationships. It is crucial to Ted and me that we model this for our kids. The most intentional method in modeling how God intended relationships is our approach to the family table. It is a timeless tool that can be used to prove that you place high value on the ones you love.

I used to have a terrible habit of clearing the table as soon I was done with my food—often when everyone else was still only halfway through the meal! I just wanted to get the dishes done so I could relax. But part of being intentional with our family table means taking the time to relax *during* the meal.

So we rearranged some furniture. I know me—if the dishes are in my peripheral vision, I am just not going to be able to relax. Now instead of eating in our kitchenette, we eat in the dining room with no view of the kitchen. This simple decision changed my life—and led to many little changes that made a big difference at our family table.

Since the dining room is a little more formal, we prep the environment as if honored guests are on the way over. And honored guests *are* coming—our family! We light candles and put out the nice dishes. We think through and prepare for conversation, games, special desserts, and devotions.

How many of us have a dining room and don't use it? Why not invite your family into this underused space each night and enjoy a meal together? Even if you don't have a dining room, try to find a way to set the table apart. Consider sitting with your back to the kitchen and maybe

purchasing a screen or curtain to separate you from the mess. The dishes probably won't bother the kids nearly as much as they bother you.

Our journey toward a more intentional family table began when our kids were five and seven. At first their questions went along the lines of "What is this?" or "How many bites do I have to eat?" or my favorite, "Do we have to have a fancy meal?" I often got discouraged and lost my resolve. But four years later, we have a twelve-year-old who asks regularly what is for dinner and if we are going to all eat together at the table. Now, our ten-year-old son is at a different place on the journey. He prefers Kraft mac and cheese to almost anything else offered to him. But he doesn't mind sitting at the dining room table as long as he can have a comfy chair and light the candles himself. He is progressing. The family table requires intentional, consistent resolve from parents. Don't give up.

We work hard to keep our kids at the family table. We play board games and question games, have place mats they can color or do crossword puzzles on, and do family devotions. And the goal of all of these games and activities is to foster conversation. The intentional time spent together gives us all the opportunity to share what's on our hearts.

Food and family bring us to the table. Stories, games, and laughter keep us there for hours. Thoughtful food and conversations create meals worth repeating. We want our children to leave home and establish family tables of their own. We want them to enjoy spending time around their tables as they talk about time they spent around our table.

That is the purpose of this book: to inspire you in creating a family table that your children and guests will talk about for a lifetime. Then, as a result, they will be motivated to bless others by inviting gatherings that build relationships around their own tables.

### **Starting Your Meal**

We've crafted this book with the same care we craft our time at the family table. At the end of each chapter we leave you with a family recipe, a game, a devotional with conversation starters, and a prayer. Every piece that you'll read has been used at our family table. Our desire is that each chapter gives you the content and tools necessary to enjoy a slow, refreshing meal with your family.

How you use this book will be unique to your individual family. Sometimes families will read the chapters together. In other cases, parents will read the chapter to connect on the theme and discuss how it fits their family. Some families will cook the recipe together, while others may have a parent or child exclusively prepare the meal. We encourage everyone to play the game around the family table and end the meal together with the devotional, discussion, and prayer.

Thank you for prioritizing your family's table. We hope your time together will impress upon each family member's heart a love for one another, your community, and the Lord.

PART I

the  
family  
table  
is for us



CHAPTER I

# SPACE AROUND THE TABLE

*The family table is a much-needed break in the midst of the grind.*

*God never hurries. There are no deadlines against which He must work. Only to know this is to quiet our spirits and relax our nerves.*

A. W. TOZER, *THE PURSUIT OF GOD*

## Take It Slow

AMY

If you've spent any time in an airport, you know that travel means hurry, delay, run, sit, and "throw all of your plans out the window—you're sleeping in a chair tonight at gate D31." Ted speaks at marriage conferences and date night challenges around the country, so we travel often as a family. And we used to eat way too much junk food on the road. We would go to the nearest chain restaurant, quickly order, ask for the check as the food arrived, and eat everything on our plate. Planning margin to enjoy a meal was

not even a consideration. It wasn't long before we found ourselves a few pounds heavier and depleted nutritionally and emotionally.

Something needed to change. I picked up magazines in airports on cooking healthy and eating real food. Then came the cookbooks. Eventually I gathered several recipes with fresh ingredients and bold flavors.

While home for extended periods of time, I prepared the new dishes. We spent less time watching the Food Network and more time in the kitchen. Good, wholesome food on the table slowed us down too. The time, preparation, and care put into a meal made us savor it.

This new take on food challenged us to step up to the plate when we traveled. We now google farm-to-table, locally sourced restaurants in the area. We schedule our travel around having wholesome, longer meals upon arrival in a new city. Ted, Corynn, and I find ourselves anticipating great meals in new places. We talk about it leading up to the meal. Most times, it is not forgotten once consumed. We relive the meal days, months, and years later. Sure, the food is important to us, but the experience becomes a memory that we savor and hold on to. The equation? Good conversation with family and friends + environment + service + good food = a blessed memory to enjoy together.

The desire to slow down the pace of our kitchens, tables, and homes is catching on. The Slow Food Movement launched in 1989, three years after Carlo Petrini, an Italian journalist, condemned McDonald's for moving next door

to a Spanish gourmet restaurant. Fast food in Rome? What would this do the health and culture of Italy?<sup>1</sup>

The Slow Food Manifesto states,

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: *Fast Life*, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods. To be worthy of the name, *Homo Sapiens* should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction. . . . May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency. Our defense should begin at the table with *Slow Food*. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of *Fast Food*. . . . Slow Food guarantees a better future.<sup>2</sup>

While we appreciate the passion in this manifesto, we are not fanatics. There are few choices and no fine dining options between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Springfield, Missouri. We've had more than a few cheeseburgers from McDonald's on that route. We joke, "Let's call it 'quick-service food' instead of 'fast food' to make ourselves feel better about this."

Balance is our goal. Speed is the enemy of intimacy. We do not want our meal pace to reflect our work pace. The family table is best served slow, not fast. In the midst of the

grind of life, God wants us to pause, slow down, and enjoy what He provides. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 says, “I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.” Just as Jesus reclined at the table of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36) and with His disciples at the Last Supper (Luke 22:14), we recline at the family table to give children and parents room to breathe. The drive-throughs of the fast-food movement escalate our chaotic schedules. Intentionally slowing down around the family table provides much-needed balance in the home through creating space for margin, safety, and laughter.

### *The Family Table Creates Margin*

Comedian Tim Hawkins jokes about the fact that everyone today is in a rush. When someone needs to use your bathroom, they ask, “Could I use your restroom real quick?” When was the last time someone asked, “Could I use your restroom for a really long time? I don’t know what’s going to happen in there?”<sup>3</sup> We have forgotten why it is called a restroom. We should rest while we are in there. Why are we in such a big hurry? Whatever happened to margin?

Author Richard Swenson describes margin as “the space that once existed between ourselves and our limits.”<sup>4</sup> The benefits of margin are “good health, financial stability, fulfilling relationships, and availability for God’s purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Our homes need it. We fizzle and fade without it. We are grumpy

when we don't get enough of it. Too much of it and some consider us lazy.

Margin means room to breathe. It's a reserve. Have you ever felt panic and anxiety and helplessness in the face of being almost out of gas and unable to find a gas station? Margin keeps a little fuel in the tank. Margin refuses to run on fumes. It does not rush from one errand or meeting to another.

Margin is the gap between your load and your limit—and the family table increases the space between your family's load and limit. Our family used to say yes to every request for a meeting or counseling appointment, every invitation to a party, every meal invite. But we are a much happier and healthier family when we say no to other good stuff and yes to time around the table.

Never allow your load to be dictated by anyone else. After all, you are the expert on your limit. There's not another person on the planet who understands or controls your limit. No one knows you better than you. The understanding of your physical, emotional, and relational limits determines your necessary margin.

Scripture calls us to a margin-filled life. God rested after creating for six days. Jesus ministered to multitudes, and then He rested. We read in Mark 6:30, "The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught." They were running full steam in their ministry, giving the reports to Him. He told them, "Hey, let's break away and chill for a while. Let's rest our bodies and our emotions. Let's take some time away so we can be more effective for

ministry.” (Okay, that’s our paraphrase of Mark 6:31, but you get the idea.)

We humans rebel against the whole idea of rest, so God had to command it: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8). *Holy* means set apart. The Sabbath looks nothing like the other six days of the week. It has a different pace and rhythm: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (verse 9). For six days God wants us to work and provide for our family. Productivity is part of God’s plan for the family. “But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work” (verse 10). We need to slow down the pace of home, table, and kitchen and provide margin to rest and relax.

### *The Family Table Provides Safety*

Consider for a moment your posture at the table. Is it warm and inviting or cold and distant? Do your children approach the table excited to spend time with you, or do they question your mood and passively resist you? Do your family and friends feel emotionally safe at your family table? Safety exists at the table when slowing down creates intentional space to communicate value to those who sit there.

Recently a pastor challenged us with how others feel in our presence. He said that there are two ways to enter a room. The first way is rooted in self and says, “Here I am.” The second is concerned about the well-being of others and says, “There you are.” When you walk into a room or conversation, do you look for ways to bless the one standing right in front

of you? Even if it is a quick conversation, the quality of that time includes both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Relationship experts teach that 7 percent of our communication is verbal and 93 percent is nonverbal. Your approach and the way you sit at the table communicate to people how much you value them. Before you speak your first word, others know where they stand (or in this case, sit) with you. Consider the following nonverbal ways to create safety around your family table:

- Eye contact says, “I am interested and focused on what you are saying.” Looking over the other person’s shoulder says, “I wonder if there is someone more interesting to talk to” or “That conversation over there looks like more fun than this one.” Looking at your watch or mobile device shows people that you would rather check the time or social media than talk to them. (And by the way, you are fooling no one with your phone sitting on your lap during dinner.) The look in our eyes can also communicate many things—sadness, curiosity, surprise, joy, relief, confusion, anticipation. Proverbs 15:30 says, “Bright eyes gladden the heart” (NASB). “Bright eyes” expresses excitement to the one you are greeting. People know when our eyes say, “There you are—I’m so glad to see you,” and they also know when they say, “Oh boy, they’re going to take up way too much of my time.”

## COME TO THE FAMILY TABLE

- Facial expressions honor others too. A wink says, “I get what you’re saying.” Raising your eyebrows shows excitement, shock, and intrigue. Gritted teeth can portray fright. A simple smile lets the other person know that you enjoy their presence, story, or joke. A furrowed brow and straight lips show empathy. Flat faces are the enemy of enthusiasm.
- Your mannerisms communicate an open or closed spirit. Folded arms say, “I’m not receiving your critique.” Arms at the side are nonthreatening and communicate openness to the feedback of another. Sitting on the edge of your seat and leaning forward shows interest and enthusiasm, but too much of it can come across as aggressive. Slouching down in your chair is a sure sign that you are tired and ready for bed.
- Your proximity to the other person is an often overlooked nonverbal. Consider where each guest will sit and how the seating will impact conversation. We have a dear senior friend whom we always place between us because she is hard of hearing. She wants to hear all the conversation but can’t do so sitting at the end of the table.
- Physical touch is a type of nonverbal communication that shows forgiveness, companionship, and even romance. Parents hold hands with their children to protect and lead them across a busy street. A husband shows chivalry by placing his hand on the small of his

wife's back as she walks through the door he opened for her. A gentle hand on the shoulder can say, "Will you forgive me?" Appropriate physical touch shows love.

### *The Family Table Invites Laughter*

Great laughter lingers at the table because slowing down allows us to relax. Laughter is never in a rush to get away. It is contagious. One joke leads to another. Just watching someone laugh makes you want to laugh. Ever walk into a room and hear laughter and immediately start laughing before you ask, "What did I miss?"

You know that book *The Five Love Languages*?<sup>6</sup> I think laughter should be the sixth love language. There are a lot of ways to help bring humor to the family table.

**Embrace everyone's personality.** Not everyone has the same sense of humor, but everyone has something to offer. For example, Dr. Kevin Leman teaches that last-born children are natural comedians.<sup>7</sup> Your favorite standup comedian is probably the youngest in their family. I (Ted) was the last born in my family, and humor, comedy, and laughter are my passion. Our younger child, Carson, is our family's comedian and keeps it light around our table. So let the comics in your family cut loose at mealtime!

The comics may keep the jokes rolling, but make sure there's space for everyone else to enjoy laughter too. Our daughter, Corynn, might not be the comic Carson is, but we love it when she throws a line or two out for a laugh. She asked me the other day, "Dad, is the song 'Friends in Low

Places' by Garth Brooks about Florida or hell?" She tried to convince me that it was a serious question, but I convinced her that she has great wit.

And encourage those who think they struggle with being funny! Amy convinced herself years ago that she does not have the timing necessary for good joke telling. Not true. She has learned to lean into her timing issues and make that part of her routine. We get many miles out of the same joke. After I tell a joke, we often work on how Amy would deliver it. With passion, she delivers the punch line and gives us all the look that says, "You'd better laugh."

**Don't ask for performance.** We get the biggest kick out of our kids reciting movie lines or song lyrics at the table. We can see a movie one time as a family and the kids memorize a dozen or so lines. We've become those parents who say, "Do that one line from . . ." You may have experienced this. But when we ask our kids to perform, they shut down. Wait and let it flow out of the overflow of their hearts. Keep the mood light and you will have plenty of laughter.

**Discover everyone's laugh style.** Our family regularly takes inventory of our personal laughing styles. We love the "Tripp and Tyler Laughing" video,<sup>8</sup> where they categorize dozens of laughs like the chuckle, the wheezer, the clapper, and the machine gun. I have a "slow machine gun" laugh. Corynn calls her laugh the "clogged machine gun." Carson considers his laugh a "cute slow machine gun." Amy has a "silent, tilt the head back" laugh. I call it patriotic because she always places her hand over her heart when she is about to

lose it. It's her way of holding it in. I tell her, "Like a sneeze, it's dangerous to try to hold it in. You've got to let it out."

We hear these four laugh styles every day in our home. Discovering everyone's laugh style is a great way to remove the vacuum of laughter from your home. However, this does come with a caution. Make sure your children know not to identify the laugh styles of guests visiting for a meal. That can be quite awkward. Wait until they leave, then cut loose. (Just kidding.)

**Use humor to soften the blow.** Humor can help us cope with the demands of this life. My all-time favorite quote on humor, attributed to nineteenth-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher, is, "A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs. It is jolted by every pebble in the road. Good humor makes all things tolerable." Laughter at the table provides a necessary break at the end of a difficult or challenging day.

Additionally, humor can play a valuable role in helping guide people into and through difficult conversations. I recently received an e-mail from a senior woman in our church. She has served in the same international ministry for sixty years and has been a member of our church for fourteen years. After a challenging sermon, she wrote,

Your humor at the beginning allowed for what was to follow. I have noted often how you get us to laugh at your candid experiences, then point us to Scripture that shows all of us that sin is not funny.

Your sharing allows us to identify and relate the points to ourselves and say, “Yeah, I’ve said that, done that, felt that way.”

Now, while humor can be an effective way to navigate difficult situations, it isn’t always the right response. My glaring weakness as a pastor is using too much humor at inappropriate times. When I feel the congregation wrestling with a deep truth or conviction, my pastor’s heart wants to rescue them (and me). As a husband, I often use humor to diffuse conflict. As a dad, I sometimes use it to get the kids to like me again after discipline. These approaches aren’t healthy. There is a fine line and skill involved in using humor to soften a difficult conversation. Humor should never be used as a distraction from something that needs to be worked through. Sometimes we must wrestle with difficult issues at mealtime and need to guard our tongues from sarcasm and jokes.

**Allow humor to cultivate health in your home and relationships.** When you walk into a home and hear laughter, you know immediately that people are enjoying one another. I love when my children laugh together, and I believe it pleases our Father when we enjoy one another in fellowship. Humor brings down walls and bonds us to one another, even those of us from different backgrounds, cultures, and denominations.

Proverbs 17:22 says, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” Laughter heals us emotionally. And according to Ecclesiastes 3:4, there is “a

time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Emotionally healthy families experience a wide range of emotions. Some seasons bring sorrow and mourning. Other seasons bring joy and laughter. Expressing these emotions around the table ministers to the well-being of the entire family.

### **Set the Pace**

You don't need to have a three-hour dinner every night to slow down the pace of your home. Start slowly increasing margin in your home and at your table. Set a limit on the number of fast-food stops each week. Consider Taco Tuesdays or Pizza Fridays at home and allow every member of your family to participate in the preparation of the meal. Open your hearts to one another. Laugh together. Declaring one special day a week for a long, slow meal increases your desire for more of it. It creates space in your life for God and others.

## ⇒Your Family Table

### **Recipe: One-Pot Apple Cider Chicken Bake**

AMY

In my quest to find simple, healthy meals that my family and guests enjoy, this fall dinner choice has become one of our favorites. If you don't own a French oven yet, I highly recommend it! In my opinion, it is a gift to the home-cook and worth every penny invested. I have come to love this

particular tool so dearly, I would probably grab it on the way out the door in a fire. The French oven cooks food and merges flavors in a way that can't be replicated without a lot more effort from other traditional cookware. I use a 12-inch round French oven that is three inches deep. Since the whole meal is prepared and served in one pot, Ted doesn't have to scrub lots of pots and pans at the end of the night!

*Recipe serves 3–4.*

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 4–6 boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 1 cup apple cider, divided
- 1 large sweet potato, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 large apple, cut in 1-inch cubes
- 2 cups of kale leaves, chopped (discard stems if you wish)
- salt and pepper to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Pour oil and butter in a French oven or large skillet that can also be placed in the oven. On stove top, heat oil and butter over medium heat. Season chicken thighs on both sides with salt and pepper and place in hot oil. Cook on both sides for about 2 minutes. Do not fully cook the chicken.

Remove the chicken and set aside. Set the pan on

medium heat. Add the onion and ½ cup of apple cider to the remaining oil. Cook until onion is nearly translucent. Add sweet potatoes and apples and stir often for 4–5 minutes. Add chopped kale and keep stirring for another minute. Place browned pieces of chicken back into the pot so they lie on the bottom of the pan, spreading out as much as possible. Pour the remaining apple cider over the chicken and vegetables. Place in the oven for about 30 minutes, or until chicken cooks through and sweet potatoes are fork tender.

### The “Who Am I?” Game

1. Pick a famous person, but don't tell anyone who you are.
2. Become that person.
3. When it is your turn, give a brief bio (four to five sentences) on who you are. Don't give too much away.
4. Impersonate your chosen person through body posture, tone, accent, gestures, and mannerisms.
5. Everyone around the table can ask you questions.
6. Have everyone reveal their guesses at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

### Devotional

My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
from the vineyards of En Gedi.

SONG OF SONGS 1:14

Hurry is one of the family's greatest enemies. It kills the soul and quality time together. We run too fast. We do too much. We like to max out our lives and squeeze out the margin to get the most out of life. But God wants us to enjoy a life in which time is not the enemy.

In Scripture, En Gedi was a lush desert oasis providing rest, rejuvenation, and relaxation to weary travelers—a place for them to slow down, to stop, to recover from the busy journey. Here are some practical ways to create a family table that refreshes and rejuvenates each member of the family at the end of a long, hard day:

**Refreshing homes refuel us physically, mentally, and emotionally.** Unplugging from the hustle and bustle of life gives our minds and bodies rest. Sitting down to eat and drink gives our bodies nourishment. When we are physically worn down, our moods are affected. A good meal restores the stomach and soul.

**Refreshing homes create judgment-free zones.** The world throws enough criticism at us—we don't need to be bombarded with it at home. Take time to listen and validate the feelings of your family rather than telling them how they're doing it wrong.

**Refreshing homes have time for games and hobbies.** Some parents say, "Family fun when the chores are done." Good idea. Every home needs the trash picked up, laundry sorted, meals prepared, lawn mowed, and homework completed. The sooner you get your work done, the sooner you can relax.

The Bible does not command us or encourage us to manage time. It calls us to redeem time, and we can do that by creating a slower home that is a place of refreshment and rest for all who enter. The most important question you must ask is, “What am I going to say no to?” The word *no* is the best way to protect your breathing room and guarantee time around the table. It keeps you going on more than just fumes.

### Discuss

- Is our load exceeding our limit?
- How would you best describe your limit? Physical limit? Emotional limit? Mental? Relational?
- What should we trim from our family calendar to create more margin in our lives and to make more time for the family table?
- How do you best recharge and refuel at home?
- If you could change one thing about our home to make it more refreshing, what would it be?

### Prayer

*Father, slow us down. We run too fast and squeeze You out of our lives. This is not our intention. We just allow it to happen. For this, we confess our busyness, speed, and hurried spirits to You. We do not want to rush from one thing to another and miss life altogether. Help us say no more often so we can say yes to the most important people around our table and find rest and refreshment together. Help us to not take ourselves so seriously.*

COME TO THE FAMILY TABLE

*May our home and table all be a safe place where we create space for family and friends. We want to create space for You to work in our family. You are an invited guest at our family table. In Jesus' name, amen.*