

Following Jesus When Your Family Doesn't

by Matt Sprenger

I didn't grow up regularly going to church. I assumed I was a Christian by virtue of my nationality as an American (it was a different world then). In the fall of 1990, at the age of 17, I gave my life to Christ. At that point, the only person in my family actively serving Jesus was a grandfather. Most weren't antagonistic or argumentative, it just wasn't in the normal realm of conversation. Since then I've had many conversations about faith, Jesus, the Bible, and the issues of life. Since then I've transitioned into college, worked in the marketplace as a Chemical Engineer for 8 years and moved into full-time campus ministry. One of my half-sisters has begun faithfully following Jesus. So, how do we follow Jesus in such a way that we honor God, give voice to His Gospel, and stay true to Him? In the midst of my own personal starts and stops, successes and failures, there are three attitudes the Lord has challenged me to have: **Humility, Hunger and Honor.**

Humility - The Gospel is Offensive but You Aren't (and You Aren't Offended)

1 Peter 2:11-17

Poor examples of the Humble Christian:

- The Offended: They get mad that their family asks a question about a mission trip, or Chi Alpha or church, that they've thought about, prayed about for hours, discussed with their Life or Resource Group Leader, and this is the first time their family has become aware of it.
- The Offensive: They use the Gospel as a club to beat their family. The Gospel is offensive. It calls sin sin and it demands we understand we need a Savior, but we never see Jesus clubbing people far from Him. Sinners were drawn to Him even though He called them to a life far different from the one they were living.
- The Chameleon: They blend perfectly with their surroundings. They are like Jesus at church, Life Group and Chi Alpha, but like their family when at home.

Practices of the Humble Christian:

- It's Healthy to Bow...so Fight in the Opposite Spirit
 - With Anger, respond in Gentleness
 - With Apathy, respond in Sincerity (that they know in that moment you care more for their soul than they do)
 - With Ascetic (self-denying), respond in Playfulness
 - With Irrationality, respond in Soberness - they get erratic, you get even-keeled.
 - Why? Because our normal way is to respond in kind. "Well, you want to be mad at me, I'll show you mad!!!!"
- A friend of my wife, Heather, received Christ while in college. Her family grew up effectively agnostic. When she became suddenly engrossed with Jesus and passionate about this group of people, her family said she was in a cult and begged her to leave school and return home. "Get away from those people." Heather's friend fought in the opposite spirit, in humility, and slowly over the last 2 decades, her family is being drawn nearer and nearer to Jesus.

- Family Code - the ways of the Chi Alpha community reflect the ways we should interact with our family.
 - March together - this will be challenging but it's a vision to pray toward.
 - Fight for, not against.
 - Stoop low, so someone else can rise.
 - Choose unselfishly for the highest good of God and His kingdom.
 - Give grace - be quick to forgive.
 - Abandon all masks.
- Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.

Prayers of the Humble Christian:

- Jesus, teach me to speak the truth in love.
- Jesus, humble and purify my heart that I might live worthy of You and speak boldly with grace.
- Jesus, may my life silence foolish talk against me...and You.

Prayers for the Family of the Humble Christian:

- Jesus, would the offense of the Cross bring conviction?
- Jesus, bring freedom to my family.
- Jesus, facilitate conversation about the transformation you've done in me.

Hunger - The Gospel is at Work like a Wolf

The shift of cultures and landscapes take time, but when it happens, it changes everything. Take a look at this video regarding what happened in Yellowstone when wolves were reintroduced to the park over 20 years ago after a many-decades absence: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

John 5:17; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Philippians 3:16

Poor examples of the Hungry Christian:

- The Silent: "What if my family...won't like me anymore, thinks I think I'm so "holy", feels like I think they're going to hell, etc.?" They so fear their family's response, that they say nothing. Often their family doesn't even know they are Christian, just that they are moral. "I don't know why she doesn't drink, but she doesn't."
- The Indifferent: "If God wants to save them, He'll save them." They are indifferent to the plight of their family.
- The Runaway: Family? What family? That's God's responsibility.

Practices of the Hungry Christian:

- Pray & outlast with the 3 Reals - Having a real devotional life, real community and real responsibility aren't meant to be things only for college. Staying close to Jesus and to His people will be such an aid as you pray & outlast your family's unfaithfulness. I have now done weddings of family members, and funerals for family. I have been asked to pray before meals in the homes of family who have told me they are atheists. I have had conversations on family vacations, at graduation parties, and on road trips. Prayer, staying close to Jesus, and having friends praying for you in these moments is invaluable.
- Walk in the Spirit & Run Toward the Mess - listen to these words of A.W. Tozer, "The world's pleasures and the world's treasures henceforth have no more appeal for me. I reckon myself crucified to the world and the world crucified to me. But the

multitudes that were so dear to Christ shall not be less dear to me. If I cannot prevent their moral suicide, I shall at least baptize them with my human tears. I want no blessing that I cannot share. I seek no spirituality that I must win at the cost of forgetting that men and women are lost and without hope. If in spite of all I can do they will sing against light and bring upon themselves the displeasure of a holy God, then I must not let them go their sad way unwept. I scorn a happiness that I must purchase with ignorance. I reject a heaven that I must enter by shutting my eyes to the sufferings of my fellow men. I choose a broken heart rather than any happiness that ignores the tragedy of human life and human death. Though I, through the grace of God in Christ, no longer lie under Adam's sin, I would still feel a bond of compassion for all of Adam's tragic race, and I am determined that I shall go down to the grave or up into God's heaven mourning for the lost and the perishing." - excerpted from *The Next Chapter after the Last*. This challenges me to run toward the mess with the help of God's Spirit for the sake of His glory and the aid of the lost.

- Trust that Jesus is Worth It - If you have no other reason to endure ridicule, or being ignored, or being mocked, or being threatened, or being treated like you are foolish, you have the only reason - Jesus is worth it.

Prayers of the Hungry Christian:

- Jesus, help me to live up to what you have already done in me and made me to be, that I may allow you to do through me in my family what you've done in me.
- Jesus, give me a vision of what you want to do in my family...of what could be, that I may be burdened by it.
- Jesus, help me outlast their disinterest, disdain, disobedience, and discouragement, that your Gospel may win them in the end.

Prayers for the Family of the Hungry Christian:

- Jesus, would your Holy Spirit remake the landscape of our family's home, history, and heritage?
- Jesus, help my family to discover that you are worth them changing.
- Jesus, rescue them from the destructiveness of sin, the torment of hell, and the deception of the enemy.

Honor - The Gospel is Fragrance

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Poor examples of the Honoring Christian:

- The Arrogant: "I'm so glad I became a Christian to get away from your influence."
- The Condemning: Everything they say to their family is in ALL CAPS. "Repent now or you're all going to hell now!"
- The Master of Really Bad Timing: Any time is a good time to show their family that they are right. -OR- Any time is a good time to demonstrate that there's a Bible verse for everything (whether it applies or not). -OR- Any time is a good time to say trite sayings that have no Biblical support (like when people told my family that "God must have needed another angel in heaven" when my 12 year old brother died - it made God look like a fickle monster, and had no Biblical precedent).

Practices of the Honoring Christian:

- Critical mind vs. Critical Spirit...therefore, Honor what's Honorable. Anyone can point out what's wrong with their family, but the critical mind recognizes where Jesus is at work. One of my family members who isn't a follower of Jesus would like to be. There was a great tragedy years ago that stands as a roadblock for them in their heart and mind. But he demonstrates physical affection and affirmation to this day. I could point out all the things he does wrong...or I could affirm where Jesus is at work in him and the parts of him that remind me of the Lord.
- God doesn't waste anything. Don't think that He who turned water into wine, raised the dead, healed leprosy and defeated sin, hell, death and Satan can't take disaster and make order.
- Answer their asked/unasked questions. I see Christian students all the time run from their parents legitimate and loving questions because they don't honor them. They've processed, but they don't see their parents need to process. Your parents had some particular vision for you and picture of what your life, and their life with you, would look. That's changing, and you need to honor them in the change. Help them understand you're thinking already about the questions they have. Tell them what you've processed and considered. Walk out the journey. Speak the truth in love and season your words with graciousness and respect.

Prayers of the Honoring Christian:

- Jesus, help me to see what I can appreciate and be thankful for about my family.
- Jesus, I yield my history, hurts and family pain to you for your transformation, healing, and redemption.
- Jesus, show me how you want to use my history.

Prayers for the Family of the Honoring Christian:

- Jesus, may honor open the door to sharing much about you.
- Jesus, may the fragrance of your gospel bring life.
- Jesus, where the fragrance of your gospel brings the smell of death, would you show my family the opportunity for deliverance?

Three Attitudes: Humility, Hunger, and Honor

The Gospel compels us to bear an attitude that looks like Jesus, one marked with humility, hunger, and honor. Make it your prayer to trust Jesus with your family. Be willing to be His hands, feet and mouth should the situation arise. I'm believing that what God has accomplished in you, He wants to do through you, because He loves your family!

Questions for Discussion

1. Of the 3 attitudes, which is strongest for you and why? Which is weakest for you and which of the 3 poor examples have you been guilty of?
2. What would happen if this family member _____ (you fill in) began following Jesus? How might that impact other family members?
3. Are there any practical steps you should take in light of reading and talking through this resource?