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BRINGING THE GOSPEL HOME

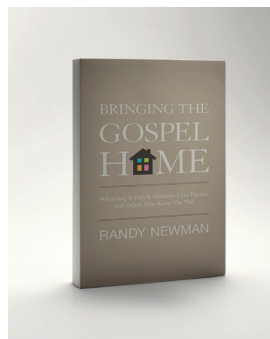
BY RANDY NEWMAN

WITNESSING TO FAMILY MEMBERS, CLOSE FRIENDS, AND OTHERS WHO KNOW YOU WELL

Jesus is off limits for a lot of families and friends—or at least that’s how it appears sometimes. Why does sharing the good news with a stranger often feel less frightening than telling those you love most?

As a messianic Jew who has led several family members to Christ, Randy gives insights from the Scriptures, stories of others who have learned some lessons along the way, and specific steps you can take to make progress in engaging with others.

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FAMILY

A Beatitude and Yet a Burden

Paulette came home for Christmas break from her freshman year of college armed with enough evangelistic tracts for each of her siblings.¹ Her two sisters and one brother were going to hear the gospel whether they wanted to or not. After all, this method of sharing the gospel in concise booklet form had worked in her life.

Having been raised in a nominal Christian family that occasionally attended church (and a rather liberal one at that), she had gone off to college with no interest in God or religion. But a campus evangelist caught her attention and started getting through to her. As she listened to his logical, intellectually respectable evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, she thought he was proclaiming a “new religion.” At least, it was new to her.

This was no open-air ranting lunatic. He spoke calmly and reasonably to a packed audience in the university’s student center auditorium and handed out comment cards for people

¹Unless otherwise noted, I’ve changed the names of people I’ve used in illustrations, and, in most cases, I’ve changed enough details of their stories to protect their anonymity.

to indicate interest in further discussion. Paulette couldn't believe her eyes as she watched her hand writing her name and dorm address on the card and check the box marked "more information." Less than one week later, two girls stopped by her room and presented the good news by doing something anyone could do: they read a short booklet and asked Paulette if she'd like to pray the prayer on the last page.

She did and she prayed and it changed her life.

So certainly the same pattern would play itself out back at home. She lined up her three younger siblings against the wall of her bedroom (after making sure that Mom and Dad were nowhere in sight). She gave them each their own copy of the booklet and read each page aloud. The fifteen- and thirteen-year-old sisters and the ten-year-old brother cowered in submission under their big sister's orders to listen. When she asked them if they'd like to pray the prayer, they all said yes. Paulette was elated (and relieved). Not only were her precious sisters and darling brother joining her in this newfound faith, but this method of evangelism had not let her down.

That was over thirty years ago and her faith has remained strong.

But the fruit from her evangelistic lineup did not endure. The elder of the two sisters continued to drink her way through high school, went off to college and partied with the best of them, and only calmed down years later—after finding peace and tranquility in the New Age movement. The younger sister puzzled everyone in the family for years because, despite her good looks, she never had a boyfriend. When she told everyone she was a lesbian, that all made sense. And Paulette's little baby brother, who showed signs of intense devotion to Christ throughout his entire four years of college, one day decided the Christian faith just doesn't work, walked away from his marriage to a Christian woman, and still finds more relevance in secular motivational speakers than in the Scriptures.

Paulette now regrets her lining up of relatives against the wall and would urge Christians to find other strategies. This book is an attempt to explore those other methods. But before we launch into that part of the task, a bit of study about the nature of the family and the truth of the gospel needs to set the stage for training and how-tos.²

God's Plan for the Family

A singles' pastor once told me, "There's no drama like family drama." Ever since, I've wondered why this is so. Perhaps it is because the stakes are so high. God's design for the family is so important, so profound, and so powerful that the Devil points his most potent weapons at this most crucial target. Given that scenario, it is no wonder we feel like we're on a contested, spiritual battlefield more often than at a serene, Norman Rockwellesque dinner table.

A full appreciation for why God loves families so much and why the Evil One hates them so much sets an important backdrop for our investigation of how to share the good news with our relatives.

Family Is Important

Our discussion of the high value God places upon the family must begin with a look at the very nature of a Trinitarian God. He calls himself "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."³ He could have chosen terms other than ones related to family. But he

²Please don't conclude that the use of booklets is always a bad method of evangelism. It can be the perfect tool in the right setting. See Owen's story later in this chapter. No single method fits all situations. Jesus' examples of addressing different people in different ways to proclaim the same message validates a variety of methods for this all-important task.

³Those who suggest avoiding emotionally charged terms like "father," "son," and "Holy Spirit" by replacing them with "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer" make too great a sacrifice at the altar of cultural relevance. To be sure, God is indeed Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. He himself validates those titles—but not as replacements for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus' authoritative use of "Father" points us to its primacy as a title, which must not be censored, avoided, or even minimized. We dare not let this world's devaluing of the family dictate our views, values, or choice of vocabulary.

didn't. Even though the title of "father" is found less often in the Old Testament than in the New, it is not out of place in the books of the law, the prophets, and the writings. The notion that God can be understood as a caring, nurturing, protecting Abba pervades both testaments.

Just one example, a rather substantial one, should suffice for our argument. When the prophet Isaiah arrived at that climactic moment of his Immanuel prophecy, declaring that the Messiah will be with us, he revealed God's trust-inspiring titles of "Wonder-Counselor, Almighty-God, *Eternal-Father*, Prince-of-Peace" (Isa. 9:6, my translation). Right there in the midst of some of the loftiest titles of deity stands the label "Father."

Thus, it is not without scriptural warrant that the Jewish community crafted and recites one of its holiest prayers, Avinu, Malkenu—"Our Father, Our King." The rabbis of old recognized God's immanent, gentle, and intimate nature found in his title "father" as well as his transcendent, royal, and holy nature seen in "king." He is both loving and ruling, to be trusted and revered, the one we rest in and bow before. Our response to him is both as sons and servants, children and worshipers, in delight and in awe.

Jesus' frequent use of the term "Father" for the first person of the Trinity was consistent with the Old Testament's depiction of God as one who "is gracious and compassionate . . . faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made . . . upholds all those who fall . . . and watches over all who love him . . ." (Ps. 145:8, 13–14, 20, NIV).⁴

No wonder Paul connects the divine pattern to every earthly family in his prayer for the Ephesians, where he petitions "the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:15) for strength, stability, grounding, and comprehension of God's love (see Eph. 3:14–19).

⁴It would not be difficult to find dozens, if not hundreds, of other verses that praise God for his father-like care and compassion.

When families fulfill their God-ordained purposes, this kind of strength flows to and through all members in beautiful ways.

Consider some of the other family terminology linked to profound truths in the Scriptures. Those redeemed by the blood of Christ are called “sons” who have been “adopted.” The church is referred to as the “bride of Christ.” And, when all of time is culminated, at what kind of banquet will we feast? A “marriage supper.”

The point not to be missed is that the image of family is woven into the revelation of the godhead and displayed at crucial junctures of God’s written Word. Therefore, we must treat family with reverence and awe. It is a divinely ordained and shaped institution, not merely some culturally constructed convention that needs to be tolerated.

There are at least two implications of God’s Trinitarian nature upon our reflections about family. First, since God is relational, we who are created in his image are also relational. We are hard-wired for communal connections, of which family ties are the most intimate and important. Second, since God is others-oriented (the Father reveals the Son, the Son submits to the Father, the Holy Spirit seeks to bring glory to the Son, etc.), so we should be others-oriented. Selflessness validates our image-of-God-bearing nature. Selfishness violates it. Living our lives theocentrically, the ultimate display of other-centeredness, resonates with our very nature, our reason for being, and our deepest longings.

All this is to say that family dynamics weigh heavily in our lives. We who have been chosen by a heavenly Father, redeemed by an atoning Son, and sealed with a Holy Spirit should value family highly. Despite all the cultural trends that serve to lampoon and demean the institution of the family (even if we imagine our specific family’s portrait in the dictionary next to the word “dysfunctional”), we who have experienced the unmerited favor of God must look to him

for the resources to uphold the high regard for this divinely ordained, all-important institution.

Family Is Intimate

When God established the family, he started with the most basic unit—a marriage between a man and a woman. He rolled out the blueprint for all time with this prescription: “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). When Jesus was challenged about possible escape clauses allowing for a divorce, he appealed to this “one-flesh” intimacy as the basis for preserving a marriage. When Paul argued against uniting with a prostitute, he recalled this “one-flesh” imagery as proof that mere “casual sex” was an impossibility and an oxymoron.

God further described intimacy as shamelessness by adding, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). These poetic statements imply far more than just sexual union. The man and the woman enjoyed unhindered oneness in all dimensions of their beings. They felt no need to hide from each other using fig leaves, lies, emotional withdrawal, or pretense. Adam and Eve had no need to explain, clarify, restate, employ active listening skills, offer alibis, or ever say, “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Just recently, I watched a pastor and his wife receive a standing ovation from their congregation as appreciation for over thirty years of caring for the church. The applause also rose out of gratitude for their modeling a marriage that endured through trials and pains. As the volume in the sanctuary rose to a level preventing anyone from overhearing, the husband whispered something in the ear of his bride. She laughed and the two of them exchanged a look that could only come after decades of intimacy. No one else knew what

he said or what she thought, but we all felt a sense of awe for the intimacy these two had forged along the way.

Among the many disastrous results of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, painfully recounted in Genesis 3, are the impulses to hide from one another (hence the fig leaves). In other words, the fall brought about a marring of the one-flesh intimacy God intended as the foundation for family.

While obviously not to the level of sexual intimacy, a kind of openness and unashamedness should pass down from the intimate couple to all of the family, thus creating a kind of greenhouse that fosters trust, depth of communication, and a joy found nowhere else.

Please don't miss my point. Families were instituted by God to foster intimacy, to build trust, to be the springboard from which all relationships should work, and to bring about connectedness between people. The Devil hates such goals and continues to do all he can to make families into sources of alienation rather than intimacy.

Family Makes an Impression

Families also serve as God's training centers. Consider the many verses in Proverbs that portray the family as the setting for promoting wisdom, developing discernment, acquiring prudence, and establishing the fear of the Lord. Relational bookends shape Proverbs—beginning with a father telling his son to pursue wisdom and concluding with a beautiful portrayal of an "excellent wife." Again, note the use of familial imagery.

To be sure, the book of Proverbs addresses other issues besides family. Many admonitions require individualistic application. Taming your tongue, balancing your budget, overcoming sloth, controlling your temper, cultivating generosity, and many other fruits of righteousness all rely on personal discipline and wisdom, which flow from the "fear of the Lord." But the numerous promises for family prosperity

and the many admonitions for parents to raise godly children support a high estimation of the power of family to forge character. It could even be argued that individuals are more likely to pursue wisdom and godliness if those virtues were modeled for them in the early, formative days of their lives.

The “tent of the upright,” contrasted with “the house of the wicked,” will flourish (Prov. 14:11), have “much treasure (15:6), have rooms “filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (24:4), and serve as a “nest” from whence people should not stray (27:8).

Proverbs seems to assume that a strong marriage is the backbone of every family. Hence, the wise father presents colorful contrasts between an “excellent wife” and the other variety. The good option “is a crown of her husband” (12:4), “from the LORD” (19:14), and a source of sensual delights, capable of “intoxication” (5:19). The one who finds such a wife finds a display of God’s goodness (a better understanding of that phrase than the way most translations put it—“a good thing”) and “obtains favor from the LORD” (18:22). These superlatives are even more remarkable when we remember that they are “a far cry from the not uncommon ancient idea of a wife as chattel and childbearer but no companion.”⁵

The wise father paints a rather different picture of the alternative. A quarrelsome wife is like a “continual dripping of rain” (19:13—an image which gets repeated in 27:15). “A desert land” is one of two locations offered as preferable to living “with a quarrelsome and fretful woman” (21:19). The other spot is “in a corner of the housetop” (21:9; 25:24).

Because God prizes family so highly, it needs protection from a variety of threats. External threats from adultery get a great deal of urgent pleading (see all the lengthy warnings in Proverbs 5–7). Internal threats that lead to strife are so

⁵Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 50.

bad that it would be better to have “a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife” (17:1).

And of course, the family is the institution in which to raise children to fear the Lord, with all the many blessings that flow from that starting point. Because “folly is bound up in the heart of a child” (22:15), parents should be “diligent” (13:24) to discipline their offspring, for that brings “hope” (19:18), “wisdom” (29:15), and “rest” (29:17). Only a fool would “despise his father’s instruction” (15:5). It could even “save his soul from Sheol” (23:14).

Can people who were not raised in God-fearing homes still pursue righteousness later in life? Of course. But one has to wonder if the task is more difficult for someone with a later start. It may parallel the way an adult learning a second language has a disadvantage to a native speaker who was reared with the language permeating the walls and hearts of the home.

Satan’s Plan for the Family

Given God’s high ideals for what families should be—reflections of the very nature of a loving, personal God, sources of intimacy and security, and environments that foster godly character—it should come as no surprise that the Devil would want to destroy them. Or at least that he would want to mar families so they misrepresent God’s character, alienate people from one another, or degenerate into hothouses for sinful behavior and thought.

It is no mere coincidence that the first ramifications from the fall were familial. The man, after being confronted by God about his sin in the garden, immediately pointed the finger at his wife as the cause of their demise: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). As one preacher so poetically stated it, Adam’s “bone of my bones” (see Gen. 2:23) had now become a bone of contention.

And where did the consequences of the fall next show up? In one brother's jealousy of another, eventually leading to murder. In a remarkably short number of verses, the idyllic family resort had become a satanic ground for death.

Today the Devil employs a whole host of devices to harm families. His goal is far more than making them "dysfunctional." In fact, the widespread acceptance of that term may be evidence that the Evil One has already succeeded at demeaning God's high purposes for family. Isn't "functional" a rather low goal for a family? Is that all we really want, that families "function"? Setting our goal so low and settling for merely "healing the dysfunctions" of a family, I believe, plays right into the Devil's game plan.

Instead, we should aim for families to be healthy, thriving, intimate, beautiful, strengthening, sanctifying, and, in the truest and fullest sense of the word, good. Let's declare a moratorium on the terms "dysfunctional" or "functional." Instead, let's talk of "healthy" or "unhealthy" families—especially when we talk *to* our families, no matter how "dysfunctional" they may be. Let's paint a better picture for what we want our families to be, subtly telling our parents, siblings, children, and others that we hold them in high regard. We want more for them than to be "functional"—a term better suited for cogs in gears than image-bearers sitting around our dining room tables.

Varieties of Attacks on the Family

Leo Tolstoy began his disturbing novel, *Anna Karenina*, with these puzzling words: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I think he saw that numerous weapons attack the family and cause a wide array of pain.

Since marriage serves as the foundation for the family, it follows that attacks on the family would begin at this strategic point. Spurred on by the Devil and appealing to our

flesh, our world today mocks marriage, inflicting some level of insecurity into every master bedroom.

A friend recently e-mailed me with his test results related to a television special about the Ten Commandments. This show explored how well the American public was adhering to the Mosaic top ten. As you might guess, some commandments fared better than others when it came to percentage of obedience. It is comforting that the vast majority of Americans have not committed murder. It might not be surprising that over fifty percent do take the name of the Lord in vain. But my friend wrote to me after the episode about adultery. Since he had never cheated on his wife, he was rated in the highest category (“holy roller”) among those who responded to the online questionnaire.

The disturbing statistic was the very high percentage of people who (voluntarily!) reported that they had committed adultery. This is not surprising however. Most movies and television shows glorify extramarital sex as better than the biblically endorsed kind. According to Hollywood, sex outside of marriage is better, more fun, and—best of all—free from negative consequences. Even when those negative consequences are admitted, they are overshadowed by such seductive, attractive portrayals of the immorality that most people find it worth the risk.

But when you talk to people who have been harmed by the sexual revolution—young men and women raised by adultery-prone parents—the images are dramatically different from the ones on TV. Young men I counsel have expressed dismay at ever being able to stay faithful to a spouse because their father failed to model such virtue. No young man should ever have to say, “My father was unfaithful to my mother,” but I have heard those very words more times than I care to recount.

The sexual revolution has also yielded another, rather unanticipated fruit—sexless marriages. Dr. Phil and other

marriage “experts” admit this is a trend not to be ignored. How ironic! You would have thought that our culture’s endless worship of sex would result in more, not less, actual engaging in the act.

But in a remarkably frank article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Caitlin Flanagan addressed this phenomenon and boldly pointed to the feminist movement as a contributor to the demise of marital sex. She reviewed several books that serve as sex guides for married women to help them rediscover the joy of the marriage bed. One such book is *I Don’t Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson. Consider the level of honesty Flanagan shows here:

If *I Don’t Know How She Does It*, a book about a working woman who discovers deep joy and great sex by quitting her job and devoting herself to family life, had been written by a man, he would be the target of a lynch mob the proportions and fury of which would make Salman Rushdie feel like a lucky, lucky man. But of course it was written by a with-it female journalist, so it’s safe, even admired. Allison Pearson, we have been given to understand, is telling it like it is. And what she’s telling us, essentially, is that in several crucial aspects the women’s movement has been a bust, even for the social class that most ardently championed it.⁶

The problems get worse as the model of what a family should be moves further from the biblical norm. Jesus wasn’t exaggerating when he said that “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy . . .” (John 10:10). And Peter wasn’t overstating things when he warned, “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

I need not belabor the point. The pain often associated with family seems to have no limit. Divorces, incest, and

⁶ Caitlin Flanagan, “The Wifely Duty,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2003.

alcohol abuse, along with addictions of the widest of varieties, have made the contemporary family the exact opposite of what God intended. Perhaps Tolstoy was onto something. Normal, healthy, beautiful families *are* all alike in that they represent God and foster joy. The perversions of that goodness have more variety than we'd ever care to imagine.

Two more products of unhealthy families need consideration. Their outward displays may appear less ugly than the ones already addressed, but they cause harm and they have profound implications for the task of witnessing to family.

The first is extreme independence. The pain from divorce or abusive families propels some people toward an idolization of independence. If family didn't provide wellness, many people erect walls to protect them from further harm. They make their internal compasses their ultimate guide. Much of the self-esteem movement plays into this and hardens those who have erected such emotional fortresses. Thus, people evolve into their own god and savior. They call the shots of their lives and live out their law in remarkably religious ways. They rarely see how selfish this is but receive much societal reinforcement.

Unfortunately, the collateral damage to those around them, especially their family, is seldom considered or acknowledged. Until people see this as sin, a rebellion against the God who made them, "good news" about a Savior will seem irrelevant at best. (I'll talk more about how to break through this idol of individualism in subsequent chapters).

The second result of an unbalanced understanding of what family should be is the exact opposite of extreme individualism. It is the idolization of the family unit. Some ethnic cultures foster this kind of family or society worship more than others. In fact, it is not unfair to generalize that Western cultures tend to idolize the individual and Eastern cultures tend to idolize the group. Of course there are exceptions to

this rule, but few people find themselves in places that get the balance right.

The ironic yet tragic result is that either way—whether the culture supposedly builds up the individual or devalues the individual—it’s still idolatry of one form or another. And idolatry never works itself out in healthy, life-affirming ways.

For people raised in families that are a god unto themselves, hearing the gospel may seem so alien because its appeal is to individuals. How to break through this barrier will also be addressed later in this book.

Redemption for the Family

The whole point of this chapter is to help us view family from a biblical vantage point. Then our witnessing to relatives occurs in an appropriate context. How we think about our family while telling them the good news is almost as important as how we think about our message.

Family Is Not Ultimate

Despite God’s high view of the family, it is important to remember that he also shows us in his Word that family is not ultimate. He alone is worthy of worship. Family must fall into place behind him.

For all the beauty, mystery, and power of marriage, Jesus taught of a balance. On the one hand, he declared, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9). On the other, he revealed that in heaven, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30).

When faced with his audience’s high prioritization of family, Jesus said something that must have offended some in the crowd. When he was told that his mother and his brothers were outside, Jesus asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” He then set a new order of relational priority by

adding, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (see Mark 3:33–35). Apparently the ties created by a second birth hold sway over those from a first birth.

Jesus’ most extreme statement about the family’s place came with these words: “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” To punctuate his statement with a timeless punch line, he adds, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (see Mark 10:29–31).

C. S. Lewis’s thoughts about “first and second things” could apply here. He wrote of the need to keep second things second. “You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first. From which it would follow that the question, What things are first? is of concern not only to philosophers but to everyone else.”⁷ Regarding family, I think Lewis would agree that when we make family more important than God or his kingdom, we distort the family and lose it. The family cannot fulfill its God-given purpose if we demand from it things which only God can provide. Such unrealistic demands from spouses, parents, children, or any other relationship cause it to be a source of pain or bitterness or alienation instead of joy, security, and intimacy.

Jesus’ placing of family underneath kingdom relationships serves as both a rebuke and an encouragement. For those of us who come from healthy families, there may be a temptation to worship it or look to it for more than it can offer. Jesus’ insistence to keep second things second can actually enhance an already healthy family by taking the pressure off. For those of us who did not have such a blessing, these

⁷C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 280.

words offer tremendous comfort and hope. Our newfound, gospel-crafted family, the church, can now bring wholeness, strength, sustenance, support, and maturity that we did not get from flesh and blood.

This is especially helpful for those who come from families with religious beliefs other than Christianity. Some Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or even Buddhist families conduct a funeral for a child who places her trust in Jesus. For some, the communication lines are permanently severed.

It is also helpful to remember that Jesus himself was rejected by his own family. After selecting the Twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach,” and developing a large following of nonrelatives, those who were related to him said, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:14, 21). John tells us that Jesus’ brothers simply “did not believe in him” (John 7:5, NIV). No wonder he summed it up with this proverb, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household” (Matt. 13:57). If your earthly family doesn’t listen to you or thinks you’ve lost your mind, remind yourself you’re in good company.

Family Is Redeemable

The Bible also teaches us to not give up on even the worst of families. The gospel’s power to redeem is greater than any family’s depth of sin. If Paul, who rounded up Christians for arrest, persecuted the church, and gave approval to Stephen’s martyrdom, could one day become “a servant of Christ Jesus” (Rom. 1:1), then so can your brother or sister or even your bisexual, dope-smoking cousin. If Peter could be transformed from a cursing denier of Jesus into a preacher to thousands on Pentecost, there’s hope for your father or mother or endlessly adulterous uncle. Closer to home, if you, who once were dead in your trespasses and sins and an object of God’s wrath (see Eph. 2:1–3), could be drawn to the Savior, then

so can even the most belligerent relative you have to endure every Thanksgiving.

Owen can't seem to tell his family's story without using the word "sweet" every three or four minutes. But things weren't always so sweet. His parents were separated more times than he can count while he was growing up, and they finally divorced when he was only fifteen. He lived with his father, a chain-smoking alcoholic, only because his mother could not be found. She would go missing for weeks and months at a time. Before leaving for college, Owen said he hadn't seen or heard from his mother in over a year and a half. "When I fled out of state to college, I assumed my mother was dead, and I hoped my father would soon join her."

Along with his clothes and a few books, he brought his anger and pain to college with him. He certainly brought no faith. With no religious upbringing, Owen says he may have gone to church a total of six times in his life. Still, he filled out a survey taken by a campus fellowship and listened carefully as a staff worker shared the gospel with him during his first month away from home. The good news that there was a heavenly Father who loved him—enough to send his Son to die for him—and would never forsake him sounded like good news indeed. Owen became a Christian and began to be discipled by that same campus staff worker.

Among the many topics of discussion with his discipler, Owen addressed the issue of witnessing to his parents. His wise friend told him it was important for him to let his family know about his new faith as soon as possible but to do so with no agenda for preaching to them . . . yet.

This was good advice, because God had important work to do *in* Owen before doing redemptive work *through* him. "I had to come to that painful realization that I was broken just like my parents were. When I focused in on my father's escape from reality through his alcohol or my mother's walking away from me, God would point out that I, too, dull

my pain with escapes from reality and I have walked away from God all my life. It was only when I began to forgive my parents that they saw something different in me that was worth asking about.”

Owen’s “sweet” story starts with God changing his heart of anger and hurt to one of forgiveness and love. The next part tells of his sharing the gospel with his mother. In his early twenties, he nervously (he says “shakingly”) read *The Four Spiritual Laws* booklet to his mother as they sat at her kitchen table. He says it was good to have such a tool to keep him on track because his nerves made it difficult for him to think straight. At forty-four years of age, Owen’s mother trusted Christ for salvation and restoration. The same scenario played out between Owen and his father less than a year later. Same result. One year after that, his parents began a lengthy (and presumably messy) process of reconciliation with each other. A short time later, they restated their marriage vows before a tear-filled family gathering—in a church.

The gospel bore fruit in Owen’s sister’s and brother’s lives as well. It also provided strength in other ways. His parents enjoyed a Christ-centered marriage in a gospel-centered church for a full decade, during which time his Mom developed into quite the initiative-taking evangelist. Who knows how many came to the Savior as a by-product of that nerve-racked, booklet-reading college student’s conversation with his mother.

But then bad news invaded the garden and Owen’s Dad was diagnosed with cancer and a few other diseases. Each one, perhaps, would not have been fatal, but the cumulative effect eventually took his life. Their entire family’s faith gave them strength to handle this trial—Owen’s Dad had assurance of salvation, his Mom had hope in the midst of horrendous pain, and Owen marveled at a God who loved them all.

If you were to ask Owen today about how to witness to your family, he would say it’s all about grace, truth, and love.

“I had to see the grace of God toward me before I could see it extend to them. I had to be honest about the pain I felt, while remembering what pain I caused Jesus on the cross. And I had to experience God’s love before I tried to share it.”

Implications for Evangelism

So how does knowing God’s view of our family help us share the gospel with them? Two implications must be mentioned. The first is that evangelizing family is difficult.

M. Scott Peck began his bestselling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with these words:

Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. (The first of the “Four Noble Truths” which Buddha taught was “life is suffering.”) It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no long matters.⁸

I quote this for three reasons. First, I think Peck is onto something—accepting that life is difficult can be a transformative experience that can be very helpful. But second, I think Peck goes too far. While I agree with the first part of his statement, I think he is naïve to think that this takes away the difficulty. And to add that, “once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no long matters” is just plain foolish. Third, I think many Christians have accepted this kind of Buddhist frame of reference for some aspects of their lives, including evangelism. But this worldview gets them into trouble because it is contrary to Scripture.

I do believe that life is difficult, and I also believe that evangelism is difficult, and I especially believe that evangelizing family members is very difficult. But just realizing

⁸M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 15.

that does not reduce the difficulty. It only helps us tackle a problem with the depth of effort it needs. When you know the difficulty of running a marathon, you train for it, eat the right foods, get proper rest, etc. If you think it's going to be easy, you'll probably drop out of the race early on. And indeed many Christians do drop out of the race of witnessing (to family or anyone else) because they thought it was going to be easy.

They had good reason for thinking this, by the way. Many books and seminars train people to witness using terms like “simple,” or “natural,” or “everyday” to describe a task, which turns out to be “difficult” or “frustrating” or “painful.”

I even saw this sales pitch in a catalog of Christian books for an evangelism primer: “This book shows you how easy and natural evangelism can be. It tells you the three questions to ask, the two illustrations to use, and the only Bible verse you'll ever need in any situation.” I am encouraged that newer books admit the immensity of the task right in their title. I am thinking of books like *Evangelism for the Rest of Us*, *Evangelism for the Tongue-Tied*, and *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*.⁹

Peck is right that we must recognize that life, or some parts of it, are difficult. He is surely wrong to say what he says next. Instead, we, as Christians, should view life through biblical lenses rather than Buddhist ones. When we do, we'll see that our world is fallen, people are slaves to sin, we don't have sufficient compassion for the lost, and the Devil is not sitting idly by as we tell people to turn from darkness into the light of Christ.

In other words, our goal, whether talking to family members or anyone else, should not be for “comfortable evange-

⁹Mike Bechtle, *Evangelism for the Rest of Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); Chap Bettis, *Evangelism for the Tongue-Tied* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 2004); Nick Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

lism” or “natural evangelism” or “easy evangelism,” but rather evangelism that heralds accurately and powerfully the goodness of the gospel—regardless of the difficulty for us in proclaiming it or the resistance from those who hear it.

A second implication is that evangelizing family is probably going to be more emotionally charged than witnessing to strangers or other acquaintances. Two emotional struggles need to be highlighted—guilt and anger. Both seem to attack from within and without.

We feel guilt from within because we think we’re not being bold enough or effective enough or patient enough or loving enough or clear enough with our witness. There may or may not be any substance to this. In other words, this may be false guilt. But some of us have real guilt because of the ways we’ve acted in the past. Our family, in other words, has seen us at our worst, and the guilt we feel for losing our temper or any other display of sin immobilizes us in our witness. “How can I tell my brother about Christ if I’m such a bad example of Christian living?” we wonder.

Some of us feel guilt coming from the outside—from our relatives—because they view us as a traitor to our family or, in some cases, our entire race. Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu converts to the Christian faith face this sometimes more intently than people coming from other faith traditions.

Padma’s father was a Hindu priest who responded to his daughter’s salvation testimony by yelling, “If you ever walk into a church again, I will kill myself.” I don’t know if I recommend Padma’s response as a universal prescription for all who may find themselves in this kind of situation, but her reply was, “Oh, no you won’t. Stop being so dramatic.”

It would take an entire book to address the topic of guilt sufficiently but a shorthand plan for handling guilt must begin with distinguishing between true and false guilt. If the guilt is a form of baseless condemnation, we need to “take every thought captive” (take control over the thought instead of

allowing it to control us), examine its content, call the accusation a lie if that is indeed what it is, and answer it with the truth. This takes a level of internal dialogue that may require practice but it is well worth the effort.¹⁰

In the case of accusations of true guilt (you really did lose your temper, acted like a jerk, got drunk, used “unwholesome” vocabulary, laughed at a dirty joke, told a dirty joke, etc.), the response must be the gospel. “Preaching the gospel to yourself” is an essential lifelong, transformational skill.

We need to resist the temptation to respond to accusations of guilt (whether from within or without) with antidotes other than the cross. We must not offer up accounts of virtue that might counterbalance our sin or present pledges for better performance in the future. Instead, we must confess with statements like this: “Yes. You’re right. I was wrong to lose my temper.” In some settings, you could add, “I guess that’s why I need forgiveness from you and from God.”

Regarding the false guilt that comes from our relatives—attacks for being a traitor, etc.—a simple piece of advice I would offer is, “Don’t fall for it.” Guilt manipulation, whether it’s the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, or any other version, must be disarmed by disengagement. For some, this disarming will be a brand new experience. Once again, the key is the gospel. Now that you have come to faith in Christ, you must saturate your thinking with the grandest diffuser of guilt: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

When parents try to manipulate their adult children with guilt (which probably has worked hundreds of times before), it is crucial for the adult child to break that cycle with a calm, loving expression of nonengagement. This may take practice. Here are some gracious things you could try to say, if you ever face a situation like Padma’s:

¹⁰ A helpful resource to help with this process is Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2006).

“No, Dad. I don’t think you’ll kill yourself. I certainly would not want you to. But I will continue to explore my faith. And that will involve my going to church.”

“Our family has always valued respect for one another, haven’t we? I’m simply asking you to respect my decisions. I’ll never express my religious opinions in disrespectful ways. And, if I do, you can call me on it.”

“I need to ask you to treat me like an adult. I’ve made some decisions that I’m sure you don’t like. But I’d like to talk about faith issues calmly. Maybe now is not the best time to try that.”

Another emotional component that needs some forethought is anger.¹¹ Like guilt, this can come from within and from without. Sometimes we get angry at our family (for not understanding us, for not understanding the gospel, for getting angry at us, for using sarcasm or guilt manipulation toward us, etc.). Sometimes they get angry at us, and we need to know how to respond.

An important key in diffusing anger, wherever it comes from, is to preach the gospel to yourself—often enough and thoroughly enough that patience, grace, and love flow out rather than insults, wrath, and lava. I will address this more in the next chapter. For now, it may suffice to ask how would your response to anger change if you meditated on one of these statements:

“I’d probably react with anger too, if one of my relatives were telling me I’ve been wrong about religion my whole life. The only reason I see things differently now is the grace of God. I can ask him to give me patience in this situation.”

¹¹I devote an entire chapter on anger and how it relates to evangelism in my book, *Questioning Evangelism: Questioning People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).

“I’m probably angry at my father (or whoever) right now because I want him to submit to me. In fact, I *need* him to submit to me because I worship control. Control is my idol. No wonder I need a Savior. I worship false gods. Thank you for the gospel’s cleansing of my idolatry.”

“She’s angry at me. Her anger is making me angry back at her. But, then again, my sin made God angry at me . . . and he chose to pour out his anger on his Son instead of on me. May that kind of love flow from him through me to her.”

These are not naturally occurring thoughts for most of us. But once we start rehearsing them in our minds (part of what Paul called, “the renewal of your mind” in Rom. 12:2), they start to inspire similar thought. Learning this new language can be a beautiful and transformative experience—even if it takes time and effort.

We could go on, looking at a whole host of other emotional issues. For some, it would be beneficial to thoroughly study, through the lens of Scripture, specific issues that trip you up—fear, anxiety, shame, loss, sadness, etc. I encourage you to shine the light of God’s Word on these potential landmines.¹² This may involve hard work, but it will pay huge dividends toward the goal of sharing Christ with your family. It is unlikely that you’ll make much headway if you just focus on evangelism techniques while ignoring the background noise of emotional stress.

Several people I spoke to expressed frustration from lack of objectivity. This seems to be in short supply when we’re around our family. “I’m otherwise a rational and calm person,” Molly told me over a cup of coffee, “but when I get around my family, I lose all sense of composure and objectivity.”

¹²My favorite source for help on emotions is the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation. See www.ccef.org.

But maybe objectivity is the wrong goal—or, at least, an unrealistic one. Maybe the strong ties of family, woven into the relationships by God, make total objectivity impossible. Maybe we should aim for (and pray for) other goals. The problem with objectivity is that it seems to require a stoic, dispassionate detachment. Often this comes across as uncaring or apathetic. That would be the last thing we would want to communicate to people we love as we proclaim a message of God’s love. In other words, perhaps the goal of love is better than a goal of objectivity. When we stand in love (flowing from God to us through Christ) and show forth love (in words and with actions), we can let go of the anger, disengage the guilt, and share the gospel so that it truly sounds like gracious, attractive good news instead of haughty, condemning bad news.

Steps to Take

1. If you don’t already have one, develop a system for prayer for your family. Perhaps you can set aside a section in a prayer journal. Or maybe you can insert photos of your family members in a place where you look for prayer prompts.
2. Begin your prayers for your family with thanksgiving. This may be more difficult for some people than others. Regardless of your family’s well-being, thank God for the family you have and all the accompanying benefits you can identify. Thank God for his love for each family member and all the gifts he’s given them.
3. You may need to include prayers of confession as well—confession of your lack of love for your family, your idolatry of control in trying to change them, your reliance on your ability to convict them of their sin instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to do that, your coldheartedness, haughtiness, and self-righteousness,

etc. Ask the Holy Spirit to shine his light of truth on your darkness of sin.

4. If you haven't already done so, "come out of the closet" as a Christian to your family. Pray for gentle words and a gracious demeanor mixed with bold confidence. Decide who would be the safest person to tell first. (I do not advise a group announcement at a holiday dinner table!) Aim for your announcement to be informational rather than evangelistic. You can trust God to open evangelistic doors later. For now, it's time to couch things in sentences like this: "Mom, there's something I think you should know about me. I've come to the place where I've decided to embrace Christianity as my faith." Or, "Dad, I've become a Christian and it's beginning to have some good effects in my life. It's all rather new, but I thought I'd tell you early on, just so you'd know what's going on."