

When Our Kids Don't Follow God

As mothers, we long for our children to come to know Christ's love and follow Him. We provide building blocks of faith when they're young by taking them to church, reading the Bible together and praying for them. The outcome we hope for is that they will choose a life of faith and experience the blessings of walking with Jesus.

But sometimes our college or adult children turn their backs on the beliefs they were raised with instead of staying the course. It's disappointing to many mothers and heartbreaking to countless others. I've met moms who are just plain angry that God didn't come through with the "prize" when they invested so much effort. And many struggle with guilt that they didn't do enough to produce a godly son or daughter like their friends have. Then, out of fear, they may try to take control and spiritually "fix" their young adult.

Release—Don't Rescue

Anna, a mom I know, was desperate for God to do something to turn her daughter's life around. Kerry hadn't attended church in a long time and didn't want to talk about faith issues. Worse, she'd been abusing drugs and alcohol. Anna had tried everything from extreme attempts to control Kerry's behavior to seasons of intense prayer.

She knew how to stand on God's Word and pray the Word over her daughter; she thought she was trusting God. So when she asked for prayer and counsel at a women's retreat, she expected God to rescue Kerry.

Anna poured out her heart to one of the counselors, asking her to pray for Kerry while confessing guilt and grief over failing to save her daughter from unbelief and negative

behavior. Finally, the counselor looked her in the eye and said, "Honey, you're just not that powerful. You can't control this." Anna was stunned but relieved at the same time. She knelt at the altar, asking God to forgive her for trying to control Kerry and her situation.

While on her knees, the Holy Spirit spoke to her heart: "Trust Me. I love your daughter even more than you do. And if you died today, I would see to it that she ends up in My kingdom for eternity. It will be in her timing and Mine, not yours."

In that moment, peace wrapped itself around Anna like a warm blanket as she envisioned Kerry in heaven with God. For the first time, it didn't matter when or how she'd "get there"; it just mattered that God would never, ever give up on her. She let go of so much fear that day. At first, nothing seemed to change. Yet, faithful to His word, God not only rescued Kerry within the next year but also began restoring her faith and her life.

Mothers in similar situations need to recognize their fear and anxiety. It can be anxiety-producing to have thoughts such as: "Is my daughter saved? Is my son on a path of destruction? Will he ever come back to church?" Yet when all our children perceive in us is fear, we aren't demonstrating the peace and faith we talk so much about.

Fear-based Christianity doesn't help our children, whatever age they are. Lecturing them on what they're doing wrong doesn't either. Controlling and trying to regulate their relationship with God tends to turn them away from Him.

Influence—Don't Force

So what is a mother to do? Take these helpful steps:

- 1. Demonstrate confidence.** Show confidence in our young adults instead of hounding, nagging or labeling them. They don't like being labeled "my prodigal," even if they're acting like one.

Demonstrate calm instead of shock if your daughter or son tells you about practices or ideas that are foreign to you.

2. Be a safe place. At some point, your children might express their doubts and concerns regarding faith, so help them feel safe enough to confide in you. This is important before kids leave home and continues to be vital so you can be what a pastor I know calls “inside the influence box.” A positive way to do that is to read books—with an open heart—about spirituality or philosophies that your son or daughter has been reading. This brings some common ground and grows more acceptance and understanding about where they are. Slowly they begin to put you “inside the influence box” so that someday they might discuss their beliefs with you instead of shutting you out of their lives.

3. Stay connected. Keep your connection going even if your son is almost 40 and still doesn’t go to church because he’s married to an agnostic and lives a few states away or your daughter is following a religion you don’t approve of. You can communicate something such as: “Since you’re an adult, I know you’re thinking and deciding for yourself. I had lots of questions about what’s truth, and it’s normal. If I can ever be helpful as a sounding board for you, let me know.” That way you’re not forcing the issue. You’re not chasing your son or daughter into God things, a drive that often brings resentment and can jeopardize the relationship.

There is something sacred, mysterious and sometimes messy about one’s faith journey. That journey is unique for each person and proceeds on one’s own and God’s timing. We can’t control or micromanage our young people’s spiritual journey—even when we’d like to.

4. Look at the big picture. Growing an adult faith takes time—and in the process, a mother’s faith, hope and love are needed—plus a lot of patience. It’s a natural part of growing up for a young person to sort out his beliefs and decide how

he's going to live.

Some of our children "catch" faith early in life and stay committed their whole lives. Others won't "get it" until their 20s or 30s. If you have a strong, independent child, she may be a maverick who wants to chart her own spiritual course starting in adolescence. Other kids are very compliant and initially follow their parents' faith but lose their moorings in adulthood because they never wrestled with faith and made it their own. They may have been on autopilot until a crisis caused them to re-evaluate and grow closer to God.

5. Be encouraged. Whether your young adult is running toward God or away from Him, the Lord wants our children to follow Him even more than we do because He has a specific purpose for their lives. Continue to live out a contagious faith that's joyful and grace-filled before your children throughout their years at home and beyond. Be a stepping stone to Christ instead of a stumbling block.

6. Persevere in prayer. Pray long-range prayers. Your prayers build up a storehouse of blessing for your children. You've given your children roots. Now, in prayer, ask God for the winds of His Spirit to be their inspiration and guide. Pray the distance because the secret to answered prayer is persistent, prevailing, not-giving-up prayers, with an attitude that is more like a marathon runner than a sprinter. Gather a few other moms to pray with you for each other's children because if you're praying solo for an extended time—years—it's easy to get discouraged and stop. And when you gather, instead of gossiping about or bemoaning what your kids are doing, pray aloud together.

Know that God hears your prayers, He never forgets them, and your prayers will outlive your life and go on blessing your sons and daughters even when your address has changed to heaven.

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