

How Parents Push Their Children Away From God

Why are young people leaving the Lord? The rate at which young people are falling away is alarming. Everyone has experienced a young person casting away their faith, either directly or indirectly. It's devastating. The most important social influence in shaping young people's religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents. Parents, you are painting a portrait of God for your children every day. Every word, action, and conversation is a brushstroke. And when your children leave home, they are staring at a portrait of God. A portrait that shapes their actions and decisions about faith moving forward.

Are there exceptions? Absolutely. I have witnessed young people leave Jesus, even though the faith of their parents was rock solid. I also saw young people continue into college on fire for God, even though their parents had shaky, fickle faith. So, this isn't a black and white, issue. Few issues are. But will you, as a parent, play an enormous role in shaping the faith of your children? No doubt. With that being said, I want to point out what young people need from their parents so they won't abandon God. I present these as someone who left God for a season in college, someone who works with young people every day, and someone who is passionate about reaching about the next generation.

They Need You To Stop Handing Their Faith Off To Others

In the first few months of working with young people, I noticed something alarming. It appeared as though parents looked to me as the primary person responsible for the spiritual growth of their kids. Why is this alarming? The Bible makes no mention of this model (Deuteronomy 6:7-9; Ephesians 6:4).

Unfortunately, most churches have created this mess. Calendars are filled with events, and a cultural pressure is placed on young people to get a gold star for perfect attendance. Don't get me wrong. I am not against a congregation working with their young people. I think it is a great tool for building their faith. But there is a problem when these events and classes becomes THE tool. Parents, you have the primary responsibility for building faith in your children. Preachers and Bible class teachers exist to equip you and supplement the work you are doing in the home. They don't exist to replace you.

They Need You To Care About Their Struggles And Their Salvation

Growing up, I remember many conversations with my parents about baptism. My congregation holds baptism in very high regard. Perhaps too high. That's how I felt, at least. I grew to hate the word "baptism," and with every conversation about why I needed to be baptized, I took one step further away from God.

Maybe that's not fair. But that's where I was. As strange as this sounds, I needed someone to care as much about my struggles as they did about my salvation. And I

struggled mightily in high school. I searched everywhere for my identity. I struggled with lust and pornography. I traveled down dark roads searching for direction. It was as if my salvation was the only thing that mattered. Eventually, I started to see God this way. He didn't have much to say about my present struggles. He just wanted me to be "saved." And I didn't care much for a God who didn't inform my current situation. So, I left.

Here's what I learned from that season. While everyone who talked to me was sincere, I believe they were trying to manufacture my salvation. Humans don't have the power to save someone. That is God's job. Parents, what you can do is show the love of God to your children. This starts by helping them see their present struggles as God's concern. Sit down with your children. Talk to them. As you do this, the gospel will come to life. Because the gospel doesn't just inform salvation. It informs everything. Addictions. Temptations. Identity issues. And once your children see that God walks with them through their struggles, they will have a stronger desire to dedicate their lives to Him (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

They Need You To Answer The Questions They Are Asking

Today's culture is extremely complicated and complex. Young people see everything. Information (good and bad) is available on-demand. And as young people battle with difficult questions about sexuality and social issues, among many other subjects, the world is forming their perspective. Every article. Every conversation. Every video. It is more important than ever that parents open up space to discuss difficult topics. It's time to stop turning a blind eye to the questions prevalent in the lives of your kids. Naivety is not an excuse. Awkwardness and tension won't work as excuses either.

I never had a conversation (at least not one I remember) with any adult about sex growing up. Nothing about lust. Nothing about God's design for purity. I never had a conversation about alcohol. I was battling these questions, but Christians weren't there to give me answers (cp. 1 Peter 1:13-16). So, I tried to figure it out myself. You can only imagine how that worked out for me. Yes, these conversations are awkward. Yes, they create tension. But your children are asking them. Unless you create space for the hard questions, they will turn to other sources for answers. And that usually doesn't end well.

They Need You To Stop Protecting Them

The world is broken. No argument from me there. It seems as though our world is more sinful than ever. But I wonder what the response would be if the same microscope were placed on cities like Ephesus and Corinth? During the time of Paul, Ephesus was overtaken by witchcraft. Every spring, roughly 1,000,000 people traveled to the temple of Artemis, which was filled with prostitutes. These people weren't going to the temple to talk about the weather.

To top it off, Ephesus hosted the Festival of Dionysus, a keg party that would have laughed in the face of any St. Patrick's Day party you have ever seen. So, how does Paul instruct the Ephesians to respond in the midst of a culture blanketed with sin? He tells them to put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-20). In other words, jump in the

fight. Paul didn't understand retreat. He expected the Christians in Ephesus to engage the culture, not run from it. When the ultimate goal is to make sure our children never experience the evils of the world, we not only do them an injustice socially, we rob them of seeing the gospel's transformative power. As a parent, your goal should be to show them how to engage the culture. In those spaces, they will see the gospel. And it will become real.

They Need To See God As More Than Rules And Church Attendance

Every decision, every thought, and every action comes down to this: in whom do I place my trust? Looking back on my childhood, this was the most important factor in my faith as I transitioned into college. I needed to see that my parents trusted the promises of God. I needed to see that my parents made decisions as though God was real and alive, not a set of rules or a list of "do's and don'ts." I got that from my mom. Not so much from my dad. And until God surrounded me with men who modeled an unwavering trust in Him, I thought following Jesus was just a piece of the puzzle.

Parents, especially fathers, never underestimate the impact of your decisions on your children. They need to see you trust God with your time and money (Matthew 6:24-33). They need to see you approach your job as an opportunity for teaching (Mark 16:16). They need to see you love people (Matthew 22:37). They need to see you trust the promises of God in Scripture (Psalm 18:2). If you boil the gospel down to church attendance and morality, your children will notice. And who wants to follow a God who is nothing more than rules and showing up to a building? I sure don't.

They Need To See Your Struggles And Doubts

You need to be strong for your children. They need to see that you have it together. I understand that. But let's get real for a second. Faith is not easy. Some questions about God don't have easy answers. You have probably experienced days where you considered throwing in the towel.

Parents, your kids have doubts. And they need to see that you have doubts as well (1 Kings 19:4). Otherwise, when questions about God come, your kids will either internalize them or turn to another source for answers. Both are bad options. I am not telling you to have confession hour every night. But there is power in vulnerability. Your kids need to know you are human. And they need to know the path to intimacy with God involves seasons of doubt and struggle.

They Need You To Plead For God To Build And Sustain Their Faith

Parents, in the journey to lay a foundation of faith for your children, nothing is more important than prayer. Pray for your children. Pray with your children. Every day. The best part of my day is when my boys lay in bed and I pray for them. I also know a day will probably come when they won't ask me to pray for them. Instead, I will have to fight through the tension and pray for them even though they don't necessarily want me to.

I am eternally grateful for my mom. And I am convinced that my faith is a product of her relentless devotion to prayer. I think my mom prayed so much for me, eventually God got tired of hearing her. Even if your child is a long way from God, He is only one prayer from them. Never stop praying for your kids. Even if your child is light years from God, God is only a prayer away from them. One prayer can change everything (Luke 18:1-8).

Parents, you are painting a portrait of God for your children. It is never too late to start investing in the faith of your children. It is also never too early to get started. Set the trajectory of faith for them now. The church plays a role in the faith of your children, but the primary responsibility is yours, parents. God would never give you a task and not equip you for it. They don't need the funniest, most knowledgeable, or best communicator to build their faith. They need you. So give them what they need.

Adapted from Frank Powell