

## **How To Share Your Faith With Your Family**

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What's the most frightening or difficult situation you can imagine for sharing your faith? I've stood before hostile crowds on college campuses. I've spoken with apathetic coworkers. I've witnessed in the inner city and shared my faith with people I've met on all manner of public transportation. I've shared my faith with people on African plains, in Arab cities, and in Central American mountains. All required swallowing some fear or overcoming some obstacle. But of all the intimidating circumstances I've ever faced, one kind of evangelism is the most difficult and frightening: sharing my faith with my family. I'm not sure what makes sharing Jesus with my family so difficult. Perhaps it's rooted in the fact that so much is at stake. When our family members reject our faith, it wounds us deeply. More importantly, none of us wants our flesh and blood to reject Christ's offer of eternal life.

Since I became a Christian more than 20 years ago, I've learned some important lessons about how to effectively share my faith with my family. But I certainly didn't get off to a good start!

#### **ZEALOUS MISTAKES**

After I became a believer at age 16, I zealously began to apply God's Word to my life. But my first well-intentioned attempts to live the Christian life often looked bizarre, not godly, to my family. My new faith was a mixture of stridency and self-righteousness. Though I loved my family and deeply wanted them to know Jesus, I sometimes acted in ways that distanced them from the faith.

For example, shortly after becoming a Christian, I decided to follow the Deuteronomic law; that was as far as I had read in the Bible. One evening, I announced to my family that I would not be eating pork. Both parents seemed a bit flustered. But I stuck to my religious guns and left the pork roast untouched. My father worried that I had somehow been brainwashed by cultic influences. My sisters, Linda and Ginny, wondered if I had found the ultimate weapon against spinach. Mom, who'd labored to prepare the meal, was just hurt.

A few months later, Mom shyly asked about my baptism in a local church, to which I had not invited my parents. She mentioned that if she had known about it, she and Dad would have happily attended. She was a bit embarrassed to find out about the event from a coworker who gushed about what a great witness it had been. "Would you mind in the future letting me know of religious functions you're attending?" she asked. Rather than see Mom's reasonable request as an open door to share with my family, however, I saw it as subtle opposition and a way of monitoring my new friends.

I also began to attend many church events, while neglecting tasks my parents had assigned. When Mom confronted me on the condition of my room, I lectured her about Mary and Martha.

Sharing the gospel was another area in which I made mistakes. In my youthful zeal, I thought that I had to train the gospel gunsights on my family at every opportunity. I corralled my sisters and read them gospel outlines. I felt puzzled and put off when Linda seemed hesitant. Ginny read them with me. But she was young, and I suspected her real interest was getting attention from her older brother.

My life and my message were out of synch with one another as well. Though I passionately desired to follow Jesus, I often failed miserably. I shared Jesus with my family, but I still struggled to give up smoking pot with old friends. These lapses deeply hurt and confused my sister Linda.

After a number of months of gospel assaults, my father commented: "Mack, your religion just isn't my cup of tea." His response had more to do with the pain I inflicted on the family than with opposition to the truth. When I left for college a short while later, I wondered if my family would ever follow Christ.

#### GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Two decades have passed since those first uncomfortable attempts to communicate the gospel to my family. Last Thanksgiving we all gathered again at Ginny's home in Tampa, Florida. Since it was Thanksgiving, we went around the room and gave thanks. Each shared that they were grateful that the Lord had used me to spark commitment and renewal in our family. Me! The one who had so alienated them. The one who had been so arrogant and rude. The one whose life seemed so contrary to his message.

Never in my wildest dreams as a new believer could I have imagined what God would do in my family. Each of them had come to know Christ in the intervening years. Mom and Dad are readying for another short-term medical mission trip to Africa. My sister Ginny leads worship at her church in Tampa. Her husband, a pilot, is finishing his training to be a missionary. My sister Linda, the last in my family to make a commitment to Jesus, is now an active leader in her vibrant church.

As I've reflected on and learned from these experiences, I have distilled several principles for sharing faith with family. I think they can be applied in almost any family situation.

#### ASK QUESTIONS FIRST

God is at work everywhere even in your family. Spend some time learning about their spiritual journeys. Ask them questions to help you understand where they're at spiritually. This will help you avoid making your family feel as if you've painted a gospel bull's-eye on their backs. Too often, we may be giving answers to questions they haven't asked. As Solomon said, "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (Prov. 18:13).

The purpose of these questions is not to gain information to help you "fix" family members, but to discover their hurts, needs, and dreams. When I started asking questions, I discovered God had been at work in my family long before I came to faith. I not only learned about my family members' spiritual lives, but also developed an appreciation for them I had not known before.

My mother, for example, shared with me heartbreaking memories of her parents' divorce. When her mother told her the shattering news—in a day when few were divorced—my mother, a tender 12-year-old, fled to her room and cried out to God for understanding. His answer? An immediate sense of His presence. Her memory of that meeting with God is so profound that it is still fresh today, more than a half century later. I'm grateful to know this story and others about my family. They give me understanding and compassion about God's presence in their lives that I could not have known had I not taken time to ask about their spiritual journeys.

#### LIVE OUT YOUR FAITH

As we live our faith in front of our families over the long haul, several key things will help them see Jesus in us.

**Forgive as Christ forgave you.** Jesus' teaching about forgiveness must be applied to everyone (see Mt. 6:9–15). This includes our families. No family is perfect. All parents did things they regret, and every family has offenses that need to be forgiven. Don't use forgiveness as a manipulative weapon: "I forgive you for being such an abusive scumbag!" Rather, forgive past offenses quietly and gently.

**Serve your family.** Scripture links our good works with our witness. Peter wrote, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet. 2:12). We need to identify the attitudes and actions that keep us from serving our families and that hinder the gospel. It's embarrassing how my family consistently outserved me, the supposedly "committed Christian."

**Open your heart.** Your family already knows you're not perfect. Make that an advantage, not a liability. Be open about your struggles and questions. Tell them you're working out your faith. If you're struggling to trust God with something in your life, admit it. Two thousand years of Christianity will not come tumbling down because you don't know the answer. Being honest adds to your credibility.

**Invite them into your life.** To this day I don't know why I wanted to keep my baptism a secret from my parents. Events such as these create natural opportunities to invite family members into our lives. They can serve as effective springboards to discussions about our faith. Give your family the chance to see your world.

My first year out of college I invited my parents to attend the Urbana missions conference with me. Though I was certain they would be busy, they surprised me by cutting short a ski trip to attend. By the end of the event, they made a commitment to Christ to take early retirement to do missions work overseas.

More than anyone else, your family sees your faults. But they will also see the longterm fruit of obedience. The work of God in our lives happens over time, not in an instant. As we persevere and grow, our families will see it. My determination to follow Christ for the long haul and my increasing maturity made up for the goofy things I did as a new Christian.

Twenty years after my conversion, my sister Linda decided she was ready at last to follow Jesus. As we talked about her spiritual journey, she shared how my walk with God through the years had overcome her initial negative reaction to my faith. "At first I thought it was some kind of joke," she said. "But I can tell it's real now." When we prayed that night and she began her walk with Christ, I was grateful that God redeems. He had given me the grace to demonstrate over time that Jesus was real.

#### LEARN THEIR LANGUAGE OF LOVE.

The language of love is a concept often used for marriage. But it's just as important with the whole family. The language of love simply means knowing what actions or words speak love to someone else. Different people experience love in different ways. For some people, a gift may be the best expression of our love. For other family members, we may need to offer to help, spend some time together, or show up for family events to demonstrate how much we value our relationship with them. If we take the time to learn others' love languages, we can purposefully relate to them in a way that blesses them the most.

## MAJOR ON THE MAJORS.

I gave up my boycott of pork within a month or so. As I began to read the New Testament, I realized that my refusal to eat pork had been based on an inadequate understanding of God's Word. I had unwittingly staked my faith on a biblical issue in a way that distorted and misapplied it. When we major on the minors and minor on the majors, we erect barriers to our families' ability to understand the gospel. We often do this in two ways.

**Self-righteous attitudes.** Christians can sometimes become overly smug in their knowledge of the truth. When we're convinced that we've got all the answers and that everyone else is living in ignorance, our arrogant and judgmental spirits will drive people away from the gospel, not toward it. Puffed up with self-righteousness, we cannot see that our proud stands on various issues accomplish little.

For example, during a radio call-in show focusing on evangelism, one woman called to instruct rather than inquire about sharing her faith with her family. Her voice rose with righteous indignation as she described the disgust she held for the charade of her family's faith. She criticized her brother's desire to have his new baby baptized even though he didn't have a relationship with Jesus. She ended with a public announcement that she would boycott the baby's baptism and family party to communicate how God felt about the whole affair.

I suspect the family wouldn't miss her much at the party. I also suspect if her family comes to faith it won't be because of her boycott. Her views made me want to cry out: "Of course your family is sinful; what do you expect? We're all sinful. Go to the party. Celebrate with your family. At least they're open to the importance of spiritual things." Would that she saw her nephew's baptism as an opportunity to love him and the family, and used it as a time to pray for him and the family. We must guard against seizing insignificant issues and going on self-righteous moral crusades, blasting everyone with our version of what's correct and what isn't.

**Confusing biblical values with extrabiblical ones.** Christians constantly mix biblical truth with the values of the world. I see this expressed in conflicting bumper stickers: "I'm hooked on Jesus!" next to "Get U.S. out of the U.N.!" Now, I don't have a particular love for the United Nations, but why let this issue become a stumbling block? How many family discussions have degenerated into fruitless arguments over issues that are not discussed in the Bible? These conversations have plenty of heat yet shed very little light. Too often, we spend time arguing about issues that are important but only tangentially related to the gospel. Paul coached his protege Timothy to avoid such arguments: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Paul understood that people would not be arm-wrestled into the kingdom. Though it's important to demonstrate a reasonable faith and answer family members' objections and questions, "winning" such arguments is not nearly as important as living out your faith with them over the long haul.

## DON'T TRY TO REFORM THEM.

When we see family members who are obviously making sinful choices, we can be tempted to denounce their lifestyles. Yet Paul said that he expected those who didn't know Christ to act like it; he did not reject nonChristians because they were acting

poorly. "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.... What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?" (1 Cor. 5:9, 10, 12). Instead, he did everything in his power to help them understand and believe the gospel: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Paul knew that apart from the Spirit's work in our lives, we would not understand the things of God. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Don't try to reform your families' morals if they don't know Jesus. We don't want nice family members in hell; we want sinners saved by grace in heaven.

#### RUNNING THE MARATHON

Family evangelism is usually a marathon, not a sprint, so pace yourself. Give yourself (and your family) more than the month or two I allotted for my family to come to faith. God tends to be more patient and loving with our families than we are. Pray for your family daily, and look for God to work. Remember Jesus' exhortation not to give up in prayer (see Lk. 18:1–4).

God can use you despite your mistakes and flaws. No one knows better than I. I regret the gospel blitzes I made on my family, but I'm grateful that I was bold. As you relate to your family, don't water down your zeal for Christ; just remember to speak with wisdom. Our God is a redeeming God. He will use you. You can count on Him to overcome and redeem awkwardness, bizarre attempts, and even outright failures to bring faith to your family. Years after I had gone over a gospel tract with Ginny, I discovered that she did make a genuine commitment to Jesus then. Truly our God redeems.

Last October, Dad asked me and my 11-year-old son, Tristan, to accompany him to Washington, D.C., for the Promise Keepers "Stand in the Gap" gathering. I have a picture of us on my desk at work. Three generations on the Washington Mall with heads bowed: my father, my son, and me. The outsider might see the picture and think what a godly family we are. They might think of the long tradition of Christian commitment we share. But I see that picture, and I think of the miraculous work of God's redemption in my family.

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