

Communicate with Teens



By *Tedd Tripp*

Teenagers' lives are full of complexity. Strong forces compete for their attention. They often feel insecure. They worry about their appearance. They spend a lot of time fixing their hair and clothes. They change their clothes three or four times before going out. They practice in front of the mirror: "Is this my good smile?" "Is this my good side?" "Will people like me?" "Will I have lots of friends?"

Teens feel vulnerable towards adults in their world. One minute adults say, "If you want to be treated like an adult, act like an adult." When teens act like adults, adults say, "Don't get too big for your britches. You're still a kid." Teens are never exactly sure what's expected of them.

Teenagers are unstable in the world of ideas. They are bombarded on all sides. They don't know what to think or why. Sometimes they test ideas by saying outrageous things at the dinner table. They look to parents to show them why those things are wrong. Sometimes parents get caught off-guard by those outrageous comments and they overreact in response.

Teens are unstable emotionally. One minute they feel wonderfully happy. The next minute they feel like the world has come to an end again for the third time that day. Their lives are emotional roller coasters. Solid ground is

hard to find.

Teens face adult temptations and adult problems: a suicidal friend, sexual desires and opportunities, access to drugs and alcohol, awareness that a friend is being abused, or remembering their own experiences of predation or molestation. But teens face these problems for the *first* time in their lives.

Teens are apprehensive about the future. How will they get from today to future usefulness in life? What will I do? Who will be my friends? Will I find someone to love? Will someone love me?

We need to interact with our teenagers with a great deal of wisdom. We need to use a careful hand. We need to communicate.

Common Pitfalls in Dealing with Teens

Teenagers draw out a multiplicity of reactions from adults—sometimes good, but often, not so good. Sometimes our teens bring out our worst responses. Do you recognize any of these pitfalls?

1. Spy vs. spy. Remember the old black spy and white spy of *MAD* Magazine who blow each other up at the end? A lot of parents develop that kind of relationship with their teens. Teens try to get away with as much as they can and parents try to catch them. They play a cat and mouse game. One mother hid in the bushes in front of her daughter's friend's house to see if her daughter was there with a banned boyfriend. Her daughter and her girlfriend came up the

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walk and caught her. The mother was mortified. It's very easy for us to fall into that spy vs. spy trap if we develop a cat and mouse relationship with our kids.

2. Disengaging. A while ago I asked another pastor, "What is the biggest problem you observe with Christian parents and their teenagers?" Without hesitation, he fired back, "Parents disengage." Parents give up trying to be a nurturing influence in their teens' lives. They limit their engagement to giving curfews and consequences. Teens are more influenced by their friends than by their parents. Parents think, *They don't care about me and what I think. One word from me and they go in the other direction anyway.* Instead of being in the thick of the battle in the most important time for teens, parents give up on trying to have any influence on them at all.

3. Authoritarianism vs. influence. By authoritarianism I'm not talking about the proper exercise of authority, but of being overly tough: "You can't get away with anything with me. I'll stay one step ahead of you. I'll make the punishment more onerous." Rather than becoming a bigger authority, we need to come alongside our teens as bigger positive influences. We need to be someone who has their ear, who shows them love, who helps them be successful in the things they want to accomplish, and who gains the right to speak to them. If I told you that the President of the United States never makes a decision without checking with me and he always does what I suggest, how much authority would I have in the government? None. But I'd have a great deal of influence because I had the President's ear. We want to become people who have influence with our teens. We want them to be willing to listen to what we say. In the years from infancy to adulthood, your authority diminishes, but your influence should increase.

4. Reckless words. Reckless words, the proverb says, "wound like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." I visited with a couple one night in their home. Their daughter came down the stairs dressed like a streetwalker. Her father snarled at her, "Where do you think you're going dressed like that. You look like a slut!" She said, "I'm going out!" And she went out the door. He turned back to me to continue our

polite conversation. It was horrible. Was there a reason for parental concern that night? Yes. Something needed to be said and done. But the words were reckless. They were destructive. That father didn't speak with the tongue of the wise bringing healing.

5. Majoring on the minors. Parents tend to focus on matters of taste and style. Teens want to dress their own way. Usually we need to let them do that. But you must carefully choose your battles. We need to focus on things that have moral significance, with biblical truths at stake. When I was that age, teens grew full beards and shoulder-length hair. My sons' generation shaved their heads and grew goatees. Each generation wants to distinguish itself from the previous generation. Don't get lost in debates over taste and style that don't have long-term moral or ethical significance.

Parental Goals for the Teen Years

What do we want to accomplish in these teen years? How do we go about it? We want to see our teens internalize the gospel of Jesus Christ as their own living faith. We want to see them get a hold of the truth and embrace it in such a way that if you, the parent, walked away from the faith, they would continue to be faithful. In order to do that, we need to nurture their interaction with the truth of the Word of God. Too often, we use our own words when we ought to use the words of the Bible. Scripture says, "God's Word will never return void but will accomplish its purposes" (Isa. 55). My speeches can be lost on my teens, but God's spirit works through the Word.

Imagine coming home one evening and finding your kids watching trashy stuff on TV. If you debate with them about whether they should be watching that, you're going to lose. They'll say, "Come on, Dad, I hear worse than that on the bus or in school. If you don't want me to hear these kinds of words, don't send me to school anymore!" But you can take them to Scripture. You can say, "I know you hear that on the bus and it's all over TV. But how do you respond to this?" Then read them Paul's words to the Ephesians.

Among you there must not even be a hint of neither sexual immorality nor any

kind of impurity, nor greed, because these are improper for God's holy people, nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For this you can be sure. No immoral or impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of God in Christ. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on the disobedient.

Therefore, do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. (Eph. 5:3-12)

from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:13-16)

This passage critiques unkind ways of speaking. It helps avoid heated arguments with your teen because it challenges both of you. And it goes on to offer hope: "But He gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" (James 4:6)

God's Word says, "Think about your speech. Did your speech reflect wisdom from above that is peace-loving, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere? Or was it wisdom from below, full of envy, selfish ambition, disorder, and every evil

Shepherd your teens through those inevitable periods of doubt.

What does it mean to take that passage seriously? With these words, Ephesians 5 just ruled out ninety per cent of primetime T.V.! You can say to your kids, "Your argument is not with me, honey. I didn't write this book. This is God's Word. This is God's way of looking at what we entertain ourselves with. We need to live by what God says. Do you want what is crude or what is good?"

Or imagine your teenage daughter speaking in disrespectful, unkind ways to her younger sisters. You could say, "I don't want to hear you talking like that. Who do you think you are, Miss Priss?" When we reprove our children using that same disrespectful, unkind manner, we end up creating animosity between us. But we could say, "Let's talk about what you just said and how you said it. Listen to what God says in James 3."

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes

practice? Jesus is merciful. Let's ask for help." Help your teens evaluate their language through the grid of God's Word. Help your teens to find help from God. In every area, shepherd and nurture your teens' interactions with the Word of God.

Shepherd Teens through Periods of Doubt

The teenage years are often times of wrestling with questions of faith. This is even true for teens raised in Christian homes. When they are little children, they believe everything you tell them about Jesus, His miracles, and more. They believe it because Mom and Dad say it is true. But as they get older they discover that some intelligent people out there don't believe the things you believe. They wrestle with the question, "Do I believe these things because I have been taught them or do I really believe them for myself?" You come to grown-up faith only by facing grown-up questions.

Shepherd your teens through those inevitable periods of doubt. Don't challenge,

“How could you question the being and existence of God after all we taught you?” Rather say, “What are your questions? Let’s talk about them. Your Mom and I are not Christians because we shut off our brains. We believe our faith is a reasonable faith. You will have problems making sense of life if you don’t believe what we have taught you all your life. We had to learn this, too.” Help them think through these things. Like in any relay race, you run alongside the other runner and make sure he has a firm hold on the baton before you let him run on his own.

Shepherd your teens with pleasant words. Pleasant words promote instruction. Proverbs 16 says, “Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the body and healing to the soul.” Such words are nourishing, tasty, constructive. Parents often feel that their kids are getting away from them, so they raise the ante in terms of destructive speech. But we need to go the other way. We need to use pleasant words, sweet to the body and healing to the soul. We want to develop relationships that lead to mutuality as adults under God. That’s crucial. *You are raising children to become fellow adults!*

Foundational Issues

Proverbs 1 describes three foundational issues for these teenage years. Study Proverbs 1. Discuss these issues with your teens. First, God’s opinion matters supremely. He watches us and weighs what we do. Second, children need to listen to their parents and remember the wise things they say. Third, we must be careful in choosing our friends.

1. Fear of the Lord.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov. 1:7)

God sees us and weighs us. That’s the starting point of wisdom. We live in perilous times. There are many foolish races. And sometimes the church doesn’t point out what we most need to hear. For example, modern evangelicalism has emphasized the immanence of God. God is with us. He’s our friend. He’s our companion. Marvelous truth is embraced in the immanence of God. But we have not equally emphasized the transcendence of God. God is a holy God. He’s

sovereign. He’s a God of glory. We should worship God in awe and reverence. We need to emphasize the transcendence of our powerful and majestic God whom wise people fear.

Modern evangelicalism often loses this. For example, rather than being brought into the presence of an awesome and glorious God, we too often reduce worship to a level of entertainment. In the last fifty years, in evangelical circles, we have thrown away the richest hymnody the church has ever had. In many cases, we have replaced it with musical ditties that can be clapped to and stomped to, but which lack depth, beauty, and majesty of the hymnody of the former generation. It’s part of that whole movement away from the sense of a transcendent God who is glorious, majestic, holy, awesome, marvelous. It’s movement away from a God to be feared, worshipped, and bowed before. Our children need this truth. They need to know the GREAT God who loves them. The fear of the Lord is Step 1 in the pathway of wisdom.

My wife and I had the blessing of having three children born within a five-year period. They tracked through life together. When our kids were little, we read the Bible stories of the New Testament and the Old Testaments with them. When they were in the middle school years, when they argued about everything, we read the epistles. We took the epistles of Paul apart and put them back together at our kitchen table. We worked through those finely reasoned arguments. When our kids were teenagers, we read the prophets. What is the theme of the prophets? Judgment. The holiness of God. It’s about a God who is pure and holy, who doesn’t tolerate sin, who overlooks nothing, who is even willing to cast His covenant people out of the land of promise and preserve only a remnant. He will not be mocked, and He will not overlook sin. Night after night in our reading, we confronted scenes of judgment. Sometimes I even questioned myself, “Is this the best thing to do?” One night five of us sat at the table. We were in a holy hush before these awful scenes of judgment. One son piped up and said, “Dad, instead of having bumper stickers that say, ‘Smile, God loves you’ we should have bumper stickers that say, ‘Tremble, God is a consuming fire.’” There’s truth to that, isn’t there? In fact,

the love of God can't be understood without understanding the wrath of a holy God.

Why does Christ hang between heaven and earth and cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Why does God pour His wrath upon His son? Because He is a holy God. He cannot overlook sin. There is no way that He can accept us into His heaven unless our sin is atoned for. God in love for us pours His wrath out on His Son in order that He might receive us into His heaven. He turned his face away from the Son in order that he might turn his face toward us. We can't understand the death of Christ without understanding the wrath of a holy God on sin and without understanding something of the fear of the Lord. Your teenagers desperately need to know the fear of the Lord. That's why it is so important to hold before them a big and glorious God so God can be the size He ought to be in their lives—not as an insignificant little thing in the tangential orbit of life, but in an awesome place. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

2. Remember Your Parents' Words

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and don't forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck. (Prov. 1:8)

Later in Proverbs, Solomon expands on this idea:

My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them on your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For these commands are a lamp, and this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life, keeping you from the wayward woman. (Prov. 6:20)

He urges his son. "Remember your parents' words." During these teenaged years, we need to connect with our kids and say things like, "Honey, I love you. I'm committed to you. Please don't allow these years to be years when you become distanced from me." It doesn't have to be that way. We need to urge our teens to see the wisdom of clinging to what Mom and Dad

have said and taught and not walk away from them.

Does that sound self-serving? If you don't tell your kids that, who will tell them? It's definitely not the message of the culture! Sadly, even church youth ministry can take kids away from home and family. Margy went with a group of young people from our Christian school to a large youth leadership conference. The speaker, a young man, got up to speak. The first thing he said was, "I want all you old people to leave the room. These teens aren't going to talk to me when you old people are here." So all the wise, mature adults, with eons of life experience, left the room. All except Margy. That speaker should have gotten up and said, "Teens, look at these old people who brought you here. Let's thank the Lord for them. They have sacrificed so you could have Christian education. They have gone without new cars. They have taken vacations at state parks. Let's thank the Lord for them." But instead what was his message? "Let's get these old people out of here because they don't understand us." That is not the message our teenagers need to hear. Instead, youth ministry needs to focus on making a bridge between family and home and making sure that family and home are together in the ways they ought to be. Our kids need to see the importance of adherence to parental guidance and wisdom.

3. Dissociate from the Wicked

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. (Prov. 1:10)

Our teens will face enticement from sinners. Wicked people will try to turn your children to all manner of wickedness: sexual looseness and perversion, drug use, stealing, disrespect for authority, reckless driving, lying, and more. We need to prepare our kids to recognize and respond to that danger. Role-play such questions as, "How do you get yourself out of a conversation that is a dangerous conversation? How do you get out of a car when the teens in the car are going places and doing things you shouldn't be part of? How do you get yourself out of the situation and say, 'Let me off here. I'll call my folks. I'll get a ride home. See you guys later.'" Help teens develop convictions and strategies that they can use to get themselves

out of dangerous situations.

But remember, those wicked people who try to turn your kids onto all manner of wickedness will not be old men in trench coats. It will be the young people they hang out with: young people who come into your house and call you Mr. and Mrs.; teens from your Christian school, your home school group, your Little League team, and your neighborhood. You think most of these teens are okay. But don't assume that you'll always be able to spot the ones who will be most dangerous for your teens.

One time, my brother, Paul, and his wife went away for the weekend. They made arrangements for their kids to stay with other families in the church. Their oldest son went to his friend's house when he got off work on Friday night. But when he got there, he realized something had fallen through the cracks in the advance planning. His friend's parents were also

do not go along with them. (Prov. 1:11-15)

Do you see what this is? It's camaraderie. It's belonging. It's a promise of good things. We need to offer an alternative—we need to make our homes places where our teenagers want to be. We need to welcome their friends and understand and engage in their interests as much as we can. We need to talk with them and be involved in their lives. We need to have times in which we can also influence their friends. There are so many displaced children in this culture. There will be no shortage of teenagers at your house!

We had—we still have—a rope swing out in front of our house. Two or three teenagers would swing on the rope while others waited their turn. Margy and I sat on the porch many times and said, "Who would believe this?" There was never a shortage of young people around.

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gone for the weekend, so his friend invited more friends over. These teenage boys were going to have the run of the house all weekend. First they got some X-rated videos. Paul's son loves the Lord. He pled with them not to do it. But, of course, they did it anyway. Paul asked his son afterwards, "What did you do when they were watching the videos?" He said, "I went into the kitchen and ate potato chips. When they were done, I rejoined them." He had the wisdom to get out of that situation. We need to train our children to do that.

What is the "enticement" of being with sinners? What do they offer to your teen? We get some hint in this passage.

If they say, "Come along with us. Let us lie in wait for someone's blood. Let us waylay some harmless soul. Let us swallow them alive like the grave and whole like those who go down to the pit. We will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder. Throw in your lot with us. We will share a common purse." My son,

When other teens visit your house, someone will inevitably kick over a can of coke in your living room. They'll sit with their feet on your furniture. They'll break your stuff. But what difference does that make? Some day your kids will back a dump truck up to your house and throw your treasures into the dumpster. They'll only keep a few of your life's treasures as mementos of their childhood! What difference does it make if your stuff gets used up for the kingdom of God? That's a small price to pay to have influence on your teens and their friends.

Down below our house is a set of waterfalls. When our kids were teens, we made torches out of tin cans, hemp rope, kerosene, and broom handles and hiked down to the falls at night. Two hundred-year old stone buildings and massive stone arches stand near the falls. These kids felt like Gandalf hiking with torches. Many years, we welcomed the New Year with a gang of teenagers down at the falls, playing the ukulele, singing, reading passages from the Bible, and talking it all over with them. There was never a shortage of kids. We had influence

on more than our own teens.

The fear of God, well-remembered words, and well-chosen friends. What encourages that? What brings that to pass?

Belonging and Communication

We need to create a strong sense of belonging in our homes. We need to have our homes be places where our kids are guaranteed acceptance, where we embrace them, engage them, and interact with them. We cannot let them get their sense of identity from other people or places outside the home.

We need to organize life so we have time to spend with our children during their teenage years. These years will fly by. Don't allow yourself to be so busy with your own pursuits that you have no time to engage your kids and spend time with them.

One summer, we took our teenagers on a biking vacation. We rode our bikes from our home in Northeastern Pennsylvania to Niagara Falls and back, about six hundred fifty miles. We carried our tents, sleeping bags, and everything on our bikes. We rode fifty to eighty miles every day. Before they could get in their tent at night, they had to write in their journal about that day's ride. When we got home, we read the journal entries, a day's worth at a time, after family worship. Everything they wrote was a reminder that they had been part of something special that summer. They called it high adventure. And that high adventure was family-based.

If we are going to create that sense of belonging, we have to be involved in communication. Most of us think communication is our ability to express our ideas with words. But the finest art of communication is being able to draw out another person's ideas. "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinion" (Prov. 18: 2). How many times are we fools in conversation? We find pleasure in airing our own opinion rather than understanding the other person.

I had a conversation one night with one of my sons that brought me up short. I had something to say to him. I went down to his room about bedtime and said what I wanted to say. Then I said, "Now I'm going to pray for you.

I'm glad we had a chance to talk together. Now I'm going to go to bed." I prayed for him. I went to bed. A few minutes later he was at the door knocking. "Dad, are you up?" I said, "Sure, come on in. What's up?" He said, "Dad, I just wanted to say when you left the room, you said you were glad we had an opportunity to talk together. I just wanted to say that I didn't say anything." I said, "Forgive me. I had a good talk. You had a good listen." He said, "Sort of." I said, "If you had said something, what would you have said?" He said, "I don't know. It doesn't matter now. I just wanted to say that I didn't say anything."

Communicating with your teens is not always going to be easy. You have to work hard to do it right. I was a fool that night. I could have said everything I wanted to say in the context of drawing him out. But instead I just wanted to get something off my chest fast so I could go to bed. I wasn't cruel or abusive with my words, but I was a fool. I gave him a monologue rather than engaging him in dialogue.

"He who answers before listening—that's his folly and his shame" (Prov. 18:13). How many times do we do that? To your teen you say, "I know what you're going to ask. The answer is 'No!'" "But Dad, I didn't get a chance to ask my question." "You don't have to ask your question! Before a word that's on your tongue, I know it altogether. Doesn't it say that in the Bible?" Our kids never leave those conversations saying, "Wow! It's great to have a dad who's a mind reader!" They can't get to first base with us. "Before I even got my question out, you fired off your No." So he feels alienated, like he can't even break through to his parent. That's a dangerous place to be. Do the opposite with your kids. Open up communication. Open up interaction. "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, and a man of understanding draws him out" (Prov. 20:5). It seems vacuous sometimes, but teens really have deep waters. Learn how to draw them out.

Margy counsels a young woman whose family does not draw her out in conversation. We don't want to take their place, so we are helping them with their communication. In the meantime, Margy asks this young woman to think about some questions before they talk each week. She goes home and writes pages of

incredibly deep, insightful analysis of herself and her family. There are deep waters in that young woman, but her parents have not been able to draw her out. Ask open-ended questions. Ask non-judgmental questions that invite conversation and interaction.

It is like the incarnation. What God does in the incarnation is amazing. He could have stayed far off in heaven and just spoken to us in clouds, thunder, fire, and lightning. But instead He comes and dwells with us. He takes on flesh like our flesh. He lives in a body like our body with the kind of limitations we have. He experiences all the things we experience. He is hungry and thirsty and tired at Jacob's well in John 4. He weeps at Lazarus's tomb. He is tempted, Hebrews says, in every point like we are, yet without sin. That's why it says, "Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted"

another pair on. You say, "I think they look nice." He looks at them. "I guess they're okay." You say to the clerk, "We'll take them." The next day he puts on the sneakers that he doesn't like and he is miserable. You could say, "Why do you even care what they look like? They will get messed up in a few days anyway. What would your friend Jared say if I told him you were crying over your sneakers? Don't be such a wimp! Those shoes you don't like, Mr. Hot Shot, cost more than my first car! Are the kids in your school shoe experts or something? Just shut up and put on the shoes!" Have you communicated? You know what he's not going to say, "Thanks, Dad. I was just being a wimp. Thanks, Dad, you're the greatest!" In your dreams! Whatever else he does with this problem going forward, you are not going to be any part of it. You have iced yourself out of his life. Maybe he'll go to his brothers and sisters

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(Heb. 2:18). In some sense Christ's capacity to understand and help us is tied to the fact that He experienced life in the way that we experience it. He looks at the world through our eyes. Furthermore, He asked questions (dozens of them are recorded in Scripture). And He listened and responded to other people's question (again, dozens). He didn't pontificate. He interacted. He met people where they were.

We want to do that with our teenagers. We want to be able to understand this teen who thinks it's attractive to have body piercings. We need to be able to look through that kid's eyes to see his world if we are going to know how to speak truth to him in the way he needs to hear it. The incarnation is a wonderful picture of this. One who with infinite love comes alongside us and understands us. That's what we need to do with our kids.

Imagine that you have a thirteen-year-old who needs a new pair of sneakers. You have gone to several stores and looked at every pair of sneakers in the entire community. He tries

and commiserate. Maybe he'll go to his friends and say, "Look at these stupid shoes my dad made me buy! I hate these shoes. He's such a jerk!" Whatever he does with the problem, you are not going to be a part of it.

Does the Bible speak to these kinds of things? It does, but we won't find it under "shoes" in our concordance. The Bible talks about our sense of identity and how it is tied to a relationship with God. "All the fullness of God is in Christ and Christ is in you" (Col. 2:9). My identity rests in the reality of being brought into a relationship with the living God because of Jesus Christ, who dwells in me. It's not because I have shoes that my friends like. Help your kids develop a sense of identity that is rooted in things that can never change—a relationship with a living God. Can teenagers get on board with that? Yes!

One year we had a retreat to get the teens ready for the new school year. Our oldest son was fifteen. My brother Paul taught about being complete in Christ (Col. 2:9). Fast-forward six

years. We are riding along in the car. My son is out of college. Out of the clear blue, he said, "Dad, remember that retreat when Uncle Paul talked to us about being complete in Christ?" I said, "Yes, I remember that." He said, "You know, those messages carried me through high school and into college." Can teenagers get a hold of this stuff? Yes!

The shoe incident might be an opportunity for you to talk about these things. How can you take advantage of the opportunity? I could draw the kid out. "You're upset about your shoes, aren't you?" "Yeah." "I didn't think you liked them when we got them last night, but you didn't want to tell me, did you?" "No." "What don't you like about them?" "They look stupid. Chris got a pair like this, and Jared told everyone he looked like a dweeb." "I see. You're afraid the kids are going to make fun of you today." "Yeah." What are you learning here? In the world this kid inhabits today, right now, these shoes are the most important thing in the world. "I'm going to walk in that school and my shoes are going to shout to everybody in the school, 'Dweeb! Dweeb! Dweeb!'" Of course, that's all out of proportion with the realities of life. But if I can't understand what he's struggling with, I lose the opportunity to speak truth to him in the ways he needs to hear. I want my child to understand that life and my sense of well-being as a person is not rooted in footwear. It's rooted in the unchanging relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Sin and Communication

Communication with our teens often involves rules, correction, and discipline. Rules are what we expect, what we allow and won't allow. Correction is when we tell them they failed to keep the rules. Discipline ensures that they pay the consequences of not keeping the rules. All those things are excellent. We need rules, corrections, and consequences to be in place in our families. But there are other dimensions of communication that we need to engage in with our teens. They need encouragement. When they fail, they need to know that God is merciful to sinful people. Then can turn towards Him, not away from Him. They need to know that God draws near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are

crushed in spirit. They need encouragement that where they have failed in the past they can know grace and help and strength in the future. They need correction. Sometimes we need to drop the plumb line of Scripture and say, "This is vertical. This is what God says is right. And right now, you are not vertical. You need to be brought back in correspondence with God's standing." They need that corrective function of the Word of God.

Sometimes they need rebuke. "You may not wish your brother or sister dead! There are limits to free speech in our family. It's wicked and wrong and reprehensible to say that!" But you can't rebuke every time you speak. If you do that all the time, your rebukes will become meaningless. We have to nuance conversation to the needs of the moment. The Apostle Paul says it this way: "Warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak" (1 Thess. 5:14). Each of those conditions requires a different communication style. The idle person needs a warning. The timid person needs encouragement. The weak person needs help. If you help the idle person, you inflate him in his idleness. He needs a warning. If you warn the timid person, you will crush him. He needs encouragement. We have to discern the communication needs of the moment. Is the need correction? Is it a rebuke? Is it encouragement? Don't be guilty of monospeak and having only one way to speak to your children. Sometimes they need entreaty. They need pleading and begging, not the pleading and begging of a beggar but the pleading and begging of a parent who understands the intensity of the moment and bares his soul, pleading with his teens to walk in the ways of wisdom.

When our boys were young, I pleaded with them about the dangers of pornography because I knew that eventually they would be confronted with it. I wanted them to have convictions in place before they were drawn into it. Do you know what happened? One of our sons, Aaron, became a crusader against pornography. Even in his Christian college, guys watched trashy things on their TVs and VCRs. He would walk in and say, "What you're doing is wicked and wrong, and I refuse to walk by and act like it's not happening." Then he would leave. That's biblical isn't it? The Scripture says,

“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). If more Christians reprovved the fruitless deeds of darkness, maybe the wicked would not strut about as freely as they do in our culture.

Aaron and his long-time church friend, Danielle, got married. Before the wedding, the ladies of the church held a bridal shower and Aaron made his obligatory appearance near the end of it. One mother was feeling so emotional. “This is so cute. These guys love each other and they love God and they are getting married. Danielle, why don’t you give Aaron a big hug?” She said, “I can’t.” She couldn’t because Aaron and Danielle had made a covenant with each other that they would not embrace until they were married. They understood how their bodies worked and how it could lead to where they did not want to go. So they decided not to do that. We were very thankful they made those kinds of choices.

Our children need instruction. Young girls, even in Christian churches, often dress in immodest ways, wearing skimpy tops, showing more than they should show. Teenaged girls think the boys like them when they look alluring. They don’t realize that the kind of attention they get is degrading attention, not flattering attention. Teenage girls need instruction about how boys work. Teenage boys need instruction about girls. We need to teach them God’s ways and God’s truth. We need to pray for them and pray with them.

Faith and Communication

Margie and I were in Israel several years ago. Our daughter Heather (in her mid-twenties) picked us up at the JFK airport at the end of the trip. She had an agenda for our ride home. While we were in Israel, a young man expressed interest in her. He wanted to meet with us and have our blessing on their relationship. After I got over the jet lag, I met with them for about three hours and talked to them about how to structure the relationship in ways that honored God. Then I prayed for them. I poured out my heart to God praying for them, expressing all my concerns and spiritual aspirations for them. I did it in their presence on purpose. I wanted them to hear me pray. Your

children need to hear you pray for them. Let your faith show. Let your faith speak out loud.

People say, “You’re not supposed to pray to be heard of men. Don’t be hypocritical or show off your religiosity.” But Jesus prays at Lazarus’s tomb, “Father, I know that you know things, but I’m praying these things because of those who are with me so they also might believe.” He prays in a way that is designed to engender faith in His disciples. Your teenagers need to hear you pray for them.

We think, “How can I find the grace and strength to do all of this?” Scripture tells us where we can find the grace and strength.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption of this world caused by evil desires. (2 Pet. 1:3-4)

Let me encourage you. The grace, the strength, the insight, the stamina, the courage to do all the things God called us to do—even in this task of parenting—has been given to us in Christ. It’s even better than a promise. It’s a statement of fact. The reality in which we live is that all we need to accomplish this task has been given to us in Christ. Something that has happened in the past, has continuing effect in the present: the grace and strength, encouragement, the stamina, the insight, the wisdom, the skill, everything we need for life and godliness has been given to us through Him who called us. Our confidence that we can do what God has called us to do is not found by looking inside. If we look inside ourselves, we will find an empty cupboard. In Christ there is grace and strength and skill to do the things God has called us to do. May the Lord bless you and strengthen you in your families.