

Shame-Based Families, Grace-Based Families

The messages of a shame-based family:

“Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel.”

“Everybody has to put their needs aside so we can tiptoe around _____ and not make them mad.”

“Why did you do that, you dumb b*tt?”

“If you disappoint me this much, how much more are you disappointing God?”

“Oh please, you’re not wearing that, are you?”

“Loser . . . stupid . . . such an embarrassment . . . I hope nobody knows you’re my daughter . . . You’ll never amount to anything . . . I wish I’d never had you . . . You’re so fat. And ugly.”

Every message of a shame-based family is an arrow into someone’s heart. Left there unacknowledged and not pulled out with truth, it starts generating lies and pain that can last a lifetime.

Lots of people grew up in this kind of family, but we are not sentenced to repeating it into the next generation. We can put on the brakes and steer our families in another direction altogether-the direction of grace.



Grace-based families also have messages:

“You are loved and valued, no matter what you do.”

“When we disagree, you never have to worry that I will stop loving you.”

“I was wrong and I am sorry. Will you forgive me?”

“Did you do your best? You’re the only one who can know.”

"Let's talk about why you did that. What other choices did you have? What can you learn from this?"

"Can you help me understand what happened, what you were thinking or saying when you ____?"

The underlying message of a shame-based family is, "You are not acceptable and you risk being rejected and abandoned." The underlying message of a grace-based family is, "You are an important and cherished part of this family and you will always be loved and accepted, even if we need to discipline you for wrong choices."

Shame-based families shame out loud through name-calling, deadly comparisons ("Why can't you be like ____?"), and anything that indicates the person is not good enough. Grace-based families affirm out loud with uplifting expressions of belief in each other, appreciation for each other, and affectionate use of each other's names. Each person feels that their name is safe in everyone else's mouths—but most especially mom and dad's.

The focus of shame-based families is on performance, looking good and being good on the outside. It's all external. Not embarrassing the family is huge. The focus of grace-based families is on the heart, remembering that character is shaped and developed in the family. The child's value—which never changes—is separated from his or her behavior, which is eminently changeable. These families remember that God is not really pleased with our choices sometimes, but He never stops loving us.

Shame-based families specialize in unspoken rules and expectations. They are discovered when one gets broken. Often, one of the unspoken rules is that no one is supposed to notice or mention problems; if you bring a problem into the light by asking, "Hey, what about this?"—YOU become the problem. When one of my friends told her parents that her brother had been molesting her, her father threatened, "Don't you ever talk

about this again. It is over.” When the abuse continued and she told her youth pastor, her father responded that his daughter was mentally ill, a pathological liar, and not to believe her.

There is often a “can’t-win” rule in effect: children are taught never to lie, but they are also not allowed to tell Grandma her cooking tastes awful. Or children are taught that smoking is bad, but if they point out that mom or dad smoke, they are shamed and shut down.

In grace-based families, rules and expectations are clearly spelled out. If an unspoken rule comes to light because someone broke it, it gets talked about without shaming the one who broke a rule they didn’t know was in place. If someone notices or mentions a problem, the problem is addressed instead of attacking the one who brought it up. In grace-based families, the *problem* is the problem, rather than the person who identified it.

Shame-based families often use coded messages to communicate, saying one thing while intending that their audience read their minds and respond to the actual message they wanted to give without coming right out and speaking it. Someone might say, “I have such a headache” and the second person replies, “That’s too bad” or “Sorry” and then continues to do whatever they were doing. The first gets upset that the other person didn’t offer to get them a pain reliever. The one with the headache used to be me, until a wise mentor responded with, “Would you like an Advil? Healthy people ask for what they need and want. Just ask me if I have one.” Whoa. That was a game-changer for me!

The communication in grace-based families tends to be clear and straight. It’s about saying what is true and what is actually meant. Scripture calls that “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). And healthy communication does not involve an unnecessary third person, a term called

“triangulating.” If someone complains about another person, or gives a message for another family member, a wise person redirects them to the one they actually need to communicate with, refusing to be the third person in a two-person communication. Another wise person has said, “If you don’t have a dog in that fight, stay out of it.” That works!

Shame-based families are preoccupied with fault or blame. They are always looking for where to place—or shift—the blame when something goes wrong. Then the culprit can be shamed, humiliated, and made to feel so bad they don’t do it again.

In grace-based families, the emphasis is on responsibility and accountability. People are responsible for their choices and held accountable for their behavior. Grace-based parents try to remember that all of life is training for a child, and it takes many, many times to learn wise and healthy behavior. So while a child may be disciplined, they are not punished for not getting something right. Instead of being shamed for slamming the door, they may be instructed, “OK, I guess you need practice in closing the door without slamming it. So you’ll be practicing 25 times in a row, starting right now.” Another way that grace-based families can build responsibility and accountability is by using natural consequences without anger: “Since you left your bicycle in the driveway again, you will lose the privilege of enjoying it for a week.” And sometimes, discipline without punishment means talking about what happened without shaming, by asking good questions: “So what can you learn from this?” “What can you do differently next time?”

Family is meant to be God’s safety net underneath is, the safe place to fall when we make mistakes and learn painful life lessons. By His grace and through being intentional, shame-based families can become grace-based families as we reflect on how God, the perfect Parent, loves us perfectly and unconditionally-yet teaches us to be responsible as we grow up to maturity.

Note: the grace-based family in the picture are my friends Rick and Abbie Smith with their sons Noah and Jaxten. If you want a blessing, check out their story of grace at noahsdad.com/story.

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Out of the Abundance of the Heart...Flows Road Rage. And Other Stuff.

In this morning's traffic, my husband apparently violated one of the most important unwritten rules of the road: he changed lanes into the very spot that another driver intended to move into. Suddenly this large pickup truck zoomed up alongside us just so he could dangerously cut us off, then slammed on his brakes. To teach us a lesson, I suppose: *Don't you dare get in my way! I'm the most important person on the road!* A few minutes later—from a safe distance—we watched him tailgate the person in front of him. He was clearly an angry and aggressively hostile driver.

We did not have to wonder what was in his heart. Lots of anger, lots of entitlement, lots of pride.

One of the most insightful observations Jesus ever made was when He said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." (Matthew 12:34) Whatever fills the heart is what is going to spill out of the mouth. But it goes far beyond that.

It's our reactions, more than our actions, that demonstrate what's really in our hearts. When people fire off emails or Facebook comments or Twitter blasts without thinking, it reveals what's in their hearts. When people leave scathing comments on a blog they disagreed with, dumping their thoughts and hitting "submit" without further thought, they are broadcasting what's in their hearts. When upset people send hurtful, insulting texts because they're "just being honest," they are showing that they are people who honestly don't have good hearts.

Have you ever been in a public place where "F bombs" fill the air like heavy pollution? The hearts generating such vulgarity and complete disregard for the sensibilities of those within earshot are full of vulgarity and thoughtlessness. That's why it flows so easily out of their mouths.

When I was in Africa, my beautiful and wise Rwandan interpreter told me, "We have an African saying—always believe a drunk man." I laughed at the sheer wisdom of that; after all, alcohol removes not only inhibitions but also filters. When a well-known celebrity's racist rant was recorded during his arrest for drunk driving, his public apology included that he had "said things that I do not believe to be true and which are despicable." Well, according to his Creator, what came out of his mouth was a painfully accurate display of what he actually does believe, despicable as it may be.

So what do we do with this connection between the heart and what flows out of it?

I think it's wise to see the ugliness of road rage, F bombs, angry and unkind comments and texts, and unloving rants like red lights on the dash board of our car. It means something is wrong under the hood. It means we need to invite the Lord to shine His light of truth on what's in our heart and show us where we need to submit to His right to be Lord of every square inch of it. It means we need to confess as sin anything

that is not honoring to Christ and to other people, and ask Him to change that in us so we look like Him.

Because the abundance of a heart filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control is going to flow out with words and actions others will actually want to be around.

And they're much better to share the roads with!

Are Ghosts Real?

The morning program on a Dallas radio station recently featured a story about one of the show personalities going to a "ghost hunt" at a supposedly haunted hospital. The staffer came back with video of a flashlight turning on and off by itself. She went as a skeptic but came back as a believer.

In ghosts.

She offered her perspective: we all go to heaven or hell, but some people get delayed on their way to their final destination. The discussion opened a stream of callers eager to share their "knowledge" about ghosts, such as the woman who has slept in cemeteries to learn about spirits. "Sometimes children don't know they've died," she assured the radio audience.

Are ghosts real? How should we think about ghost hunting and anecdotes of people seeing disembodied spirits? My grandmother reported that she had seen her late husband walking through the living room years after he died; what do we do with stories like that?

It really doesn't matter how we feel or what we think—the only

thing that matters is what God has revealed to us about the spirit world. And there is no room in a biblical worldview for the spirits of dead people wandering around, stirring up mischief or playing with flashlights.

The Bible says that “It is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). That means heaven or hell. The apostle Paul wrote that for the believer in Christ, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). In chilling language, Deuteronomy 18 forbids any kind of dabbling with the occult, which the pagans already living in the Promised Land indulged in, and which God absolutely prohibited:

“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer,

or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.” (vv. 9-12)

Ghost-hunting is seeking occult encounters, which is the domain of evil spirits, and God warns us to stay far away from all of it.

But people, lots of people, have reported seeing *something*. How should we interpret seeing those who have died, and inanimate objects moving of their own accord? I would suggest that this is all the work of demons, evil angels who have rebelled against God. God’s word tells us they masquerade as something other than what they are; Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and his servants disguise themselves as

servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Devils lie and deceive. It makes sense that they would deceive people by appearing as ghosts and impersonating dead people. Whether they terrorize the living through fear or just distract us from what is true and good, it's all the work of God's enemy.

We not only live in a fallen world, we live in a war zone where we walk around as targets of the enemy, whether we recognize it or not. Paul wrote that we struggle against the powers of this dark work and against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12). Part of that spiritual war is the strategy of terrorism or distracting us by things like counterfeit ghosts and the movement of physical objects by unseen but real spirit beings who can manipulate the physical world.

When I think about the radio listeners who called in to offer their "knowledge" about ghosts, I found myself thinking about the critical-thinking "[Killer Questions](#)" that we ought always be using as a filter for what we read, see and hear. Especially "Where do you get your information?" and "How do you know that's true?" Someone who sleeps in a cemetery to gain information about the spirit world may well be receiving information from "the other side," but how accurate and trustworthy is it? Why should she believe everything the spirits are telling her? What kind of spirits are feeding her "facts" about how things work in the spirit realm?

I am grateful for the trustworthiness and reliability of God's word that tells me how to think about ghost-hunting and ghost-busters. It's about messing with demons pretending to be something other than what they are. (In my angel article [Angels: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#), I call them "ugly angels") That's why He forbids us to dabble with anything dark and occult. He wants to protect us because He's a good, good Father.

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On Coffee: Drinking and Thinking

I'll admit it, I'm hopelessly biased, but my son is a world-class Mr. Coffee expert. Kevin regularly travels to three different continents in search of relationships with farmers growing excellent coffee he can roast and sell in his San Francisco [café](#). Over the years he has shared his coffee knowledge (and bags of really *really* good coffee) with my husband and me. We now know the difference between utilitarian commodity coffee that is just a caffeine delivery system, and the complex flavors of a cup of specialty coffee that stands alone even without cream or sugar. For Christmas, he gave us the perfect coffee-making setup to take with us on a cruise, assuring us that we would have the best coffee on the ship.



Unfortunately, the fancy new hotpot for heating water was too fancy for the fire-conscious security officers, and they confiscated it during the cruise. So we tried drinking the ship's coffee, but much of the time it tasted like it had been prepared by someone who doesn't understand the importance of proportion between coffee grounds and water. One day I took a picture at breakfast to commemorate the day I absolutely could not drink the abysmally wretched beverage they called coffee. I'm just not that picky. I now have an "educated palate," but I'm not a picky person.

Unless someone really crosses a line. And they did.

Now that I've been taught about coffee complexity and the role of terroir (the soil and climate where coffee is grown, just like with vineyards), I taste and appreciate coffee differently. It occurred to me that something similar, but far more important, happens to our thinking when we are taught biblical truth and values. Once our eyes are opened to God's perspective and His presentation of truth, it changes how we process what we see and hear.

And, like developing a cultured palate for great (or not-so-great) tasting coffee, we develop discernment in spotting truth (or not-so-true) and error.

For example, I just received a phone call from someone who found me online and called to bounce some ideas off me. He said he thinks he's the Messiah because he has made several predictions that have come to pass over the past couple of years. I told him that he can't be the Messiah since the angel told the disciples that Messiah Jesus would return to earth the same way He left, through the sky and the clouds (Acts 1:11). And the Messiah is sinless and perfect, and since he is a sinner, he can't be the Messiah. I asked him what he was reading and studying in God's word, and he said that right now he's reading the Book of Enoch. I told him that Enoch was written by man, not supernaturally inspired by God, so it's not scripture. He needs to be reading and studying God's word, not man's word.

It's knowing God's word that allows me to compare this young man's thoughts to the truth of God and explain where his thoughts and feelings, while they feel right and true, are off base. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line." When we have the "straight line" standard of God's word, we can identify what crooked is.

Someone else recently expressed his understanding of the Trinity as “There’s Father God, then Jesus is God as a human being, and the Holy Spirit is God in our hearts.” He thought the Trinity was different expressions of God as He related to us. Because of having received good teaching and good Bible study skills, I was able to compare his thoughts to how the Bible reveals truth about the three-Personed God: eternally existing, before there was a universe—Father, Son and Spirit loving and adoring and delighting in each other totally apart from us. (Gen. 1:1-2, Eph. 1:3, John 17:5) The Trinity existed forever, long before there were people.

It’s nice to be able to tell the difference between great coffee and good coffee and dreadful coffee, but it’s far more important to be able to tell the difference between spiritual truth and error, between wisdom and foolishness, between God’s thoughts and man’s thoughts.

By the way, we finally figured out that we could have room service bring us a carafe of steaming hot water, which I poured over our wonderful coffee grounds to make what was still the best coffee on the ship.

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Christmas SHINY!

I love shiny.

I love sparkly, glittery, light-filled, dazzling *anything*.



My motto is, “If it don’t shine, it ain’t mine.” And I’m not alone. When women visit Dallas, one of the most popular places for friends to take them is to a huge [store](#) that sells thousands of pieces of costume jewelry with more bling than you can imagine.

Why do so many of us like shiny? I think it’s because we are hard-wired for worship and we long for heaven where even the streets gleam with gold, and beautiful jewels and pearls abound. Heaven is a shiny, glorious place that radiates the beauty of a shiny, glorious Savior.

But our early “shiny” is a poor, sad imitation of the true glory of God. I especially love how God reveals Himself in the Bible through His *Shekinah* glory, where the invisible God makes His glory visible and weighty with importance and value.

We see more instances of the Shekinah glory in the book of Exodus than any other book in the Bible:

Moses and the Burning Bush: God appears to Moses as a fire within a bush that doesn’t consume the bush, revealing Himself as the great I AM, calling Moses to lead His people out of slavery into the Promised Land.

In the cloud by day, pillar of fire by night. God led His people for forty years in their wilderness wanderings by a visible manifestation of His presence.

The cloud on Mt. Sinai where Moses met with God, and He gave Moses His rules for relationship in the Ten Commandments.

Moses asks God to show him His glory. While up on the mountain, Moses asks to see God's glory; God basically replies, "You can't see My face and live. While My glory passes by I will hide you in a cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand. Then I'll let you see My backside. That will be safe for you."

After seeing God's Shekinah glory, **Moses' face shone so brightly** that it hurt to look at him. It was reflected glory, the way the moon reflects the sun's light. Still, it was so powerful that his face literally shone when he came down off the mountain to speak to the people.

The cloud of Shekinah glory covered the Tent of Meeting and filled the Tabernacle when they dedicated it. The glory was so intense Moses couldn't go inside.

We see the Shekinah glory one more time in the Old Testament, when Solomon's temple was dedicated, and God's glory fills the temple like it had filled the Tabernacle. Then we don't see it again for hundreds of years.

The next time in scripture we see the Shekinah glory is the night Jesus was born!

And while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for the government's census, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory [*the Shekinah glory*] surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will

recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” (Luke 2:6-18)

But wait! But that’s not all!

Matthew 2 tells us about the magi, the wise men from the east, who traveled to Jerusalem in search of the baby King of the Jews. They followed a star that moved until it stopped right over the house where the toddler Jesus and his family were living.

My husband Ray says it wasn’t a natural conjunction of planets or stars, since they don’t move like that and certainly don’t stop over a house. In his Probe article “[The Star of Bethlehem](#),” he suggests it was the Shekinah glory leading the Magi to Jesus.

The same Shekinah glory we see in Exodus appears in the Christmas story. So much of the Old Testament points to Jesus, and we get to see it start to unfold in the Christmas story.

God is all about connecting the dots so we understand how things fit together. Not so we can enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of puzzle pieces interlocking, but so we can truly grasp that He made us for Himself, He made us for relationship with Him.

The Shekinah glory in Exodus points to the glory revealed in the Christmas story, where the Son leaves heaven and comes to earth as a perfect, sinless human, fully God and fully man. He lives a perfect, sinless life then dies on the cross to take the punishment for our sin onto Himself. Three days later He rises from the dead and He is alive today.

Little Baby Jesus isn't still in the manger: He is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven in glory!

Shiny, resplendent, luminous glory. And that is the *real* reason I love shiny. It reminds me of Jesus, of heaven, of what lies ahead for those of us who have trusted Christ.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/christmas_shiny on Dec. 15, 2015.

“What About an Inter-racial, Inter-faith, Same-sex Marriage?”

Dear Mrs. Bohlin,

What is your position and/or your church's position on inter-racial marriage? And the same on marriage between religious faiths? How would you advise me to respond to a relative who has stated intentions to marry an atheist, of the same sex and of a different racial and ethnic background?

I agree with my church's position on inter-racial marriage, which is that biblically there is no prohibition against it—the prohibition is about believers in Christ marrying unbelievers. realtruthrealquick.com/interracial-marriage-christian/

Concerning inter-faith marriage, that depends on your definition of inter-faith. Some make a distinction between

Christian denominations and say, for example, that Presbyterians shouldn't marry Episcopalians. I don't think that is inter-faith, that would be *intra*-faith marriage. But when we're talking about, for example, a Christian marrying a Hindu, that is clearly prohibited in scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments. The children of Israel were instructed never to marry any pagan neighbors, and we are told in 2 Cor. 6:14 not to be unequally yoked, believer to unbeliever.

Concerning your relative: is s/he a believer in Jesus? Then I would ask them how they are dealing with the Bible's teaching not to marry a unbeliever, and the Biblical pattern of marriage as strictly between husband and wife (with no exceptions). Most of the time, people who do what they please regardless of what the Bible says, do so because they don't know what God has said in His word . . . or if they do, they dismiss it for a variety of reasons, all because they want what they want. There is a heart of rebellion there. If your relative is a believer, the biggest issue is the authority of the Bible and their refusal to submit to it.

If the relative is not a believer, God's standards and commands are STILL given "that it may go well with you," (stated 8 times in Deuteronomy)—they function like guardrails on a treacherous mountain road. If we stay inside of the guardrails, we are protected from careening off the cliff to disaster below. But this person's relationship with God—or rather, the lack of one—is the most important issue. If they're not a believer, they probably don't care what God has said, mistakenly thinking that the Bible's commands and restrictions don't apply to them. But that's like thinking, "If I don't believe in gravity, I can do what I please and get away with it." No. No one gets away with trying to violate the law of gravity . . . and eventually, they discover they can't get away with violating the law of God either. Their biggest need is salvation. They need to know that God's Son, Jesus, died for his/her sins, was buried and rose from the dead three

days later so s/he could be reconciled to God. That need overshadows questions about who they want to marry.

I send this with a prayer that you will be able to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) to your relative, and he or she will have ears to hear.

Blessings,

Sue

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Rejection is Protection

Last week I got a text from my son: “Mom, I’m in Nairobi [Kenya]. Please pray they let me in Burundi tomorrow, I just heard they may not be issuing visas at the airport tomorrow like last year.” Well, they didn’t. He had to fly back to Nairobi to get a visa through the American embassy, a process that added days and expense to his plans. We prayed and God said no—or, more accurately, “Not yet.” Eventually he was able to get the visa, enter the central African country and visit with coffee growers.

God had closed the door for what turned out to be a few very dangerous days. When we asked Him to open the door to Kevin, He said no.

But “rejection is protection.” Kevin learned that while he was traveling and running around Nairobi trying to get his visa, murderous violence had been exploding in Burundi. It was quite possible that as an outsider, he might have been seen as a spy or an aid to opposition forces in that extremely volatile country. God’s closed door, as disappointing as it was, was

His loving protection. (Which continued on my son's trip: he flew out of Paris just hours before the Nov. 13 attacks, after which the president closed the borders and shut down international flights.)

Rejection is protection when God is sovereign. And He always is.

His "no" feels like rejection because we don't get what we want, but there's always a bigger story at play.

In 2002 I was invited to speak at women's retreat in Germany and immediately said yes. "Don't you want to pray about it?" our pastor friend asked with a smile. "Oops. Yes, I supposed I should." So I did—and within an hour I had a strong, unmistakable unsettledness in my spirit, a lack of peace that all but shouted "NO!!!" That made absolutely no sense to me, and with deep regret I told our friend that for whatever reason, God had said no. But it made perfect sense six months later when, during the weekend of that women's retreat, my husband was hurt in a serious car wreck. God knew I needed to be home instead of Europe. His "no" was love; His rejection was protection.

(By the way, when I was privileged to speak at that church's retreat in 2013 and 2014, I showed a picture of my husband's totaled car. I wanted them to see evidence of God's loving sovereignty in play.)

My friend Ann ran for the school board in her city and lost. A wise spiritual director, helping her process the "ouch" of this disappointment, was the one who pointed out that sometimes rejection is protection. Ann tells me she has probably used that phrase a hundred times in responding to people's stories of God's closed doors and answers to prayer that weren't what they wanted.

How many times have we wept over relationships that didn't work out, only to realize later how disastrous they would have

been? Or, if we were already involved with *that* person, we would have missed meeting and marrying our spouse?

Garth Brooks made this concept famous with his song “Unanswered Prayers,” which I would argue is a great name for a song but lousy theology because “no” and “not yet” are answers to prayer!

Rejection stinks. It always does. But it usually means protection because God is a good, good Father who’s always looking out for us.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/rejection_is_protection on November 17, 2015.

Ways to Minister to a NICU Family

My sweet friend Kayla Grey has been dear to me since she met her husband-to-be at Probe Ministries’ Mind Games camp several years ago, where I get to teach. It has been a joy to walk with this wise, smart, loving, godly young woman as she married and had her (first) two sons, the second of whom had a difficult delivery and spent nine hard, hard days in NICU. I loved this post on her blog [Renown and Crowned](#) so much I asked if I could share it here.



The overwhelming nature of the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) can paralyze even the most organized families. Suddenly you are living a life you never planned, and since you didn't plan to live this way, figuring out what you *need* becomes a daunting task in and of itself.

Friends and family may say this simple phrase: "Let us know if there's anything we can do to help." (or the variation "Let us know how we can help.")

In our experience, we wanted to be able to say, "This is how you can help!" – but we didn't even know where to start. We didn't spend a huge amount of time at the hospital until about day 4, and we didn't really have an idea of how quickly Trooper would come home until then. It was hard to know what to ask for at the beginning.

As the week progressed, we became more aware of what would help us in our situation. If you're looking for ways to help a NICU family, here are some ideas to consider. *Note: Because each family has different dynamics, these will not all apply to everyone. If you aren't sure whether one of these ideas would truly help the family you're ministering to, be sure to ask them.*

- **Journal and pen** – I found out quickly how the days

blended together in my memory, and I wanted to record the journey for recollection later. My sister also suggested using a journal to write down what doctors and nurses reported when, so you would have a written record if you were getting 2 or 3 differing opinions.

- **Gift cards** – Sometimes you just need to get out of the hospital. Sometimes you need a bite to eat that isn't cafeteria food. And sometimes you need "food" that will get you through the transition-to-home stage. Gift cards for grocery stores can also be helpful.
- **Gas cards** – Particularly if the family has a decent commute to the hospital, gas cards can ease any budgetary concerns that might play into the frequency of their visits.
- **Bags of snacks** – One family gifted us with 3 large sacks of snacks and breakfast foods. This was so helpful for us, especially on the days we forgot to eat a "real" meal because of logistics or meetings. *Note: Be sure to check with the family to see about any food allergies.*
- **In-home meals** – It amazed me how one meal being brought in could free up so much mental power. Plus, if the meal was large enough, there could be leftovers for another meal or two!
- **Activity bags** – Hospital waiting rooms can be rather difficult for older siblings. A new coloring book, play-dough, or a puzzle could be a welcome diversion from the mundane.
- **Visiting with, listening to, praying with them** – We all have a story to tell . . . and sometimes, telling someone who's "outside" of the emotion and doctors' orders begins the process of renewal and recounting God's goodness, even in the NICU world. Even if you can't fully relate to where the family is experiencing, listening is a huge help.
- **Older child care** – Is there an older sibling who's stuck in the midst of back-and-forth? Spending an hour reading books or coloring can allow Mom and Dad to sit with the

littlest child together.

- **Fill their freezer** – Figuring out what to cook after arriving home can be an unnecessary source of stress. Prepare (or buy) some casseroles to be frozen. This way, the family can use them as slowly or quickly as needed.

Are you long distance from the family in need? You can help, too!

- **Snacks from Amazon or Walmart.com** – Let the technology of the Internet do some of the work for you! If there is a Walmart near the hospital, you can select snacks (or even microwaveable meals!), purchase them online, and have them “shipped” Site to Store. The family could then send someone to pick up those items, without paying a penny. Amazon, on the other hand, can be a bit more pricey, but you can have more obscure snacks or groceries sent straight to their home.
- **Practical needs** – By the same token, paper goods can come in handy when the transition-to-home takes place. Paper plates, paper towels, toilet paper, and the list goes on. . . . You can help keep the family well stocked so they don’t have to make a midnight run for toilet paper.

Send Scripture verses as encouragement and reminders of Truth. **Pray.** Tell them you’re praying. Ask how you can pray more specifically – especially for Mom and Dad individually as they pour themselves out for their little one. Ministry doesn’t have to be a one-size-fits-all for NICU families, and it probably shouldn’t be. Look at the gifts God has given you, the things you enjoy doing to help others, and start there. *You may be just what that family needs “for such a time as this.”*

Your turn: *If you have experienced the NICU world, what was the best help you received? What would you suggest NICU families ask for when the “How can I help” question arises?*

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I've Got a War Room—Now What Do I Do?



Millions of people have seen the summer blockbuster movie *War Room*, many of them challenged to be more intentional about prayer. Some have even cleaned out a closet or a corner to make their own War Room.

But the movie, for all its motivation to experience the power of prayer, did not provide instructions on what and how to pray. Other than eating potato chips in secret!

Prayer is not about sacred words or flowery religious language. Biblical prayer is about talking to God, heart to heart. Here are some suggestions for what to do in the War Room.

Many people have found it helpful to follow the structure of the acronym ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Directing our prayers and thoughts in this particular order aligns the heart with God's heart.

Adoration: This is simply telling God how great He is, focusing on His character and praising Him with words. The

book of Psalms is one of the best place to find truths about God and tell Him about it. Several years ago, I went on a treasure hunt as I read through the Bible, drawing a box around every title and name of God I encountered, and writing them down on the blank pages at the back of my Bible. Simply reading some of the titles of God back to Him constitutes adoration. ("You are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! You are the Bright and Morning Star! You are the Ancient of Days! You are the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth!")

Confession: Quietly consider what unconfessed sin you need to bring out in to the light. Confession means to agree with God. You may not even feel remorseful about it (yet), but it is still important to agree with God that sin is sin and you were wrong. ("Lord, I confess being short-tempered with my family yesterday. I confess yelling at that driver who cut me off in traffic. I confess going all day without once thinking of You. I was wrong. Please forgive me.")

Thanksgiving: Consider the things God has given you, the things He has done for you, just in the past 24 hours, and tell Him "thank You." The discipline of keeping a gratitude journal provides lots of things to give thanks for. The great thing about being mindful of what God is doing so we can give thanks for them, is that it makes us more sensitive to the many ways in which He shows His love and concern for us throughout each day, which kicks up our gratitude meter, which overflows in more and more thanksgiving, which leads to a joyful heart.

Supplication: NOW we get to the part of asking for the things we need or want, or which we would like to see God do in our lives and in the lives of others. It really helps to keep a list of our requests, just like we see in the movie, so we have a record of how and when God answers them.

This is one of the most misunderstood parts of prayer because often, people mistake having faith in the answers they want,

with having faith in the God who answers prayer in His time and in His way. It's fine to ask (not demand, and not presume) for what we want, but it's important not to have unrealistic expectations of getting everything we ask for like a spoiled little kid. (This is one of the reasons people lose heart and can lose their faith—they aren't trusting the God who sees the big picture and knows what is good for us and what isn't, they are looking for the answers to their prayers on a timeline usually faster than the one God is on.)

What should we pray for?

Our daily needs (see also: the Lord's prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," Matthew 6:11), financial provision ("your Father knows what you need before you ask Him," Matthew 6:8), relationships ("it is not good for man to be alone," Genesis 2:18), peace in our relationships ("Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you," John 14:27) . . . whatever comes to mind.

But we get a head start when we pray God's word. This is great War Room material! Consider praying for one's spouse (even a future spouse!) or children or friends the great prayers recorded by the apostle Paul.

"Lord I ask that _____ may be filled with the knowledge of Your will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that he will walk in a manner worthy of You, to please You in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of You; strengthened with all power, according to Your glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to You, Father, who have qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12)

"I pray that You would grant _____, according to the riches of Your glory, to be strengthened with power through Your Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in his heart

through faith; and that he, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that he may be filled up to all the fullness of You.” (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Consider praying a Psalm, such as Psalm 1:1-3—

“I pray that _____ would be blessed, that she would not walk in the counsel of the wicked,

Nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

I pray her delight would be in the law of the Lord,

And in Your law she would meditate day and night.

I pray she would be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither;

And in whatever he does, she would prosper.”

Spiritual warfare was one of the elements of the War Room movie, and prayer is how it is battled and won. For the simplest form of it, we can look to how Jesus prayed for His disciples in John 17. He asked His Father:

- To keep His disciples safe from the evil one (v. 15)
- To set them apart in the truth (v. 17)
- For oneness (v. 21). The context was oneness within the Body of Christ, the church, but this is a powerful request to pray for our marriages as well.

I am also intrigued by His prayer in v. 23, “You have loved them just as You have loved Me.” Most people have no idea of just how much and how great the Father’s love is for us—He loves us the exact same way and the exact same amount as He loves His Son! I love to pray that God will allow my loved one to grasp this truth, which corresponds to the Ephesians 3

prayer above.

Jesus also prayed for Peter before his spectacular, epic failure when he denied his Lord, that his faith would not [completely and utterly] fail, and that after he turned back, that he would strengthen his brothers. Praying for our loved ones' faith not to fail, and for God to redeem and use any lapses and stumbles, is a powerful way to pray for them.

An important part of War Room prayer strategy, just as in physical war, is to remove obstacles to effectiveness. In Mark 11:25, Jesus said, ""Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions." An important thing to do in anyone's War Room is to examine our hearts for any unforgiveness and deal with it.

Well, I think that's a good start on your War Room! Would you like to add any suggestions? Comment below!

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do_i_do](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/ive_got_a_war_room-now_what_do_i_do)
on Sept. 22, 2015

Should We Go to Our Gay Neighbors' Wedding?

"Sue, I love my sweet gay neighbors, and after the SCOTUS decision I figure we'll be invited to a wedding. Do we go?"

Christians take different positions on this question, just as Christians take different positions on the issue of homosexuality in general and same-sex marriage in particular.

I believe that regardless of our feelings on this issue and about our friends and loved ones, we need to follow what the Word of God says.

Both Old and New Testaments clearly state that homosexual behavior is sin. Regardless of how we feel about those who engage in it, the Word of God is internally consistent on this issue: all sex outside of marriage, which is restricted to one man and one woman in a lifetime covenant, violates God's created intent for us. And that includes homosexual sex. Redefining marriage does not change the unnatural, sinful nature of same-gender sex (Romans 1).

A wedding is a communal event where society gathers together to witness the union of two people coming together to start a new family, a new building block of community. The point of a wedding is that the guests witness, support, bless and approve the marriage. Contrasted to lovers making promises to each other in a private intimacy, the communal witness and celebration of a wedding elevates and formalizes these vows as a covenant (a promise on steroids), and the new one-flesh union becomes a recognized part of the community.

So there is a huge difference between having dinner with gay neighbors, and attending their wedding. When people attend a wedding, it makes a statement. Attendance at a wedding means one is offering support, approval and blessing to the couple.

I suggest that since God has already spoken clearly about the nature of homosexuality, He would not contradict Himself to endorse and celebrate what He has declared to be sin (Leviticus 18:22). Neither should we.

Beyond that, the scriptures also direct us not to support other people's behaviors that God calls sin:

"Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them" (Eph. 5:11).

1 Timothy 5:22 instructs us not to “take part in the sins of others. . .”

How can one attend a gay wedding without participating in “deeds of darkness,” without “taking part in the sins of others”?

To be consistent, Christians should examine why we attend any wedding. Since the Bible is equally unequivocal about believers marrying unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14), it would be wrong to attend that wedding as well. It would be saying, “I support, affirm, bless and celebrate this union.” Just like going to a wedding of a Christian who dumps his wife without biblical grounds to marry a younger trophy wife. No!

Lots of people scoff at this position: “God is a God of love! Who are you to judge anyone’s love?”

It’s true, God IS a God of love, and He has described love for us:

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous;
love does not brag and is not arrogant,
does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,
does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;
bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

If love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but God has declared that same-sex relationships are not right, then it is not loving to engage in unrighteousness. If same-sex relationships are outside God’s created intent for human sexuality, then it is not loving to support and bless relationships that grieve God and will result in pain down the road for the people involved.

So, to answer my friend’s question: “How can you attend a gay

wedding without making a clear statement of support and endorsement, approval and blessing? And since you know what God says about the nature of their relationship as sin, what statement would you be making as His ambassador?" I encourage my friend to keep loving her wonderful neighbors, to continue to be their friends and to be salt and light to them.

But not to go to their wedding.

And if they ask why, to kindly and lovingly say, "I am a Christ-follower, and He has spoken about His intention for marriage. Just as He loves you more than you can imagine, I love you too, but I'm so sorry, I can't stand with you that day. But I'll look forward to visiting with you, as usual, on the other side of that day. And I will be praying for you."

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