

GET OUTTA MY FACE!

HOW TO REACH ANGRY, UNMOTIVATED TEENS
WITH BIBLICAL COUNSEL

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Shepherd Press
Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania

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PREFACE

Here's a fact.

Angry, unmotivated, and disinterested teens, whether Christian or not, are confused, insecure, and often blind to everything except what they want right now. Their desires and actions have been corrupted and polluted by sin. *That's why they have a problem.*

Here's another fact.

Angry, unmotivated, and disinterested teens, whether Christian or not, are made in the image of God. This means their desires and actions are never 100 percent corrupted and polluted by sin. *That's the key to solving their problem.*

Far from dismissing or sugar-coating sin, this approach opens wide the door to evangelizing the unsaved teen and to helping the Christian teen grow in holiness and wisdom. This book will teach you how to build a bridge to young adults on the basis of the ways in which their desires and actions reflect the image of God and the blessing of common grace.

P A R T I

WHAT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND TO CONNECT WITH YOUR TEEN

Chapter 1

There Is Good Reason for Hope

Chapter 2

Understanding Your Teen Biblically

Chapter 3

Wise Wants—A Point of Contact

Chapter 4

Your Stance—Determine to Glorify God

Chapter 5

Your Stance—Remember the Log in Your Own Eye

1

THERE IS GOOD REASON FOR HOPE

After thirty years as a high-school counselor, I know exactly what *Get outta my face!* looks like. After raising six teenagers, I have endured seasons where I had to live with that attitude, day in and day out. I've had plenty of angry, unmotivated, or disinterested teens send me the same clear message. Usually, they don't even need to speak. Whatever I may be trying to help them with, their expression says it all: *Get outta my face! I don't want to hear another word.*

Having talked with hundreds of parents, counselors, and youth workers over the years, I know I'm not alone in this. Nearly all of us stumble from time to time when we try to talk to an angry or upset teen. Am I suggesting it's our fault when one of them gives us a *Get outta my face* response? Not completely. But the vast majority of the time, it is preventable. Those walls that go up so easily between adults and teens certainly involve sin on the teen's part. Yet I'm convinced that most of us who try to reach young adults are completely unaware of the profound and extensive counsel Scripture offers us—counsel that can often keep those walls from going up in the first place.

The good news of this book is that it is not difficult to learn how to reach teens. In the following pages I attempt to unpack some of the rich, timeless wisdom of Proverbs and other sections of Scripture that God has given to equip us. As you continue reading, you will learn:

- How to talk effectively to an angry, disinterested, or unmotivated teen (who usually doesn't want to talk to you)
- How to nurture this young person's willingness to make better choices (when he or she often doesn't think that other options make any sense)
- How to restore a rich relationship (when both adult and teen may have given up hope that the relationship can get better)

The truths in this book are not new. They are rooted in the 2,000- and 3,000-year-old wisdom of the New Testament and the book of Proverbs. Remarkably, many youth counselors,* advisors to parents, and public-school counselors and educators now use *some* of these principles to help angry and at-risk teens. In most cases, however, they do not know where these truths come from or why they work so well. Therefore they have no idea how to use them to produce anything more than a temporary, external change—nor would they be able to in many non-Christians settings such as public schools.

But Christian parents can be encouraged to know that the Designer has shown us in Scripture how to talk effectively to anyone made in his own image—even teens whose sin breaks out in anger, bitterness, complacency, rebellion, defiance, or disinterest. The Bible's testimony about God's Word being a "light" and a "lamp" for his people (Psalm 119:120) is not vague idealism. *Get Outta*

*Some of the most prominent practitioners who have written, without particular interest in biblical principles, but whose writing shows the influence of the good sense that God makes possible in working with angry teens are Steve de Shazer, John Murphy, John Sharry, and Linda Metcalf.

My Face! aims to summarize common experiences parents have with angry teens and illustrate how biblical principles can bring remarkably clear and useful light to these situations. The aim is to position these truths on the bottom shelf so we can all reach them and put them to use with angry, unmotivated teens—even if we’ve made serious mistakes in our previous efforts. We all want to help these young people recognize their self-destructive ways, learn new and effective methods of dealing with life, and ultimately come into a deep and life-changing relationship with Christ. That’s the goal of this book.

Who You Will Meet Throughout These Pages

In this book, you’ll meet parents and teens who were at their wits’ end with each other until they both began to make different decisions. The parents changed how they were approaching their teens, and the teens reevaluated whether their choices were really helping them get what they truly wanted. Here are a few of the people and some of the common themes you’ll read about.

- Sarah’s mom says her daughter is increasingly disrespectful and doing less and less school work. “Whenever I try to talk to her she gets angry and just shuts down. If I bring up anything having to do with the Lord, she just rolls her eyes.”
- Bill’s dad pleads for help. “When I try to talk to Bill about the things that we get into arguments about, he won’t talk to me. I try to explain the reasons for my decisions but he just tunes me out. If there is any reaction, it’s just to get into another argument. Then he ends up blaming me for not understanding and not listening. He usually goes to his room or to the rec room muttering something like, ‘I can’t talk to you!’”
- Sue is a sophomore in high school who has been thrown out of class for her disrespectful speech. “The teacher is so unreasonable about the way she grades . . . She has

these perfectionistic standards for everyone. No one agrees with the way she grades. I just couldn't take it anymore. She's so unreasonable."

- John is a junior who "just won't do anything," his mom said. "He is just so unmotivated. We've taken everything away from him. He's lost everything but still won't do any of his work."
- Emily is fifteen, and as big as her mom. She says that her mom "just yells and won't listen. She gets loud and yells at everything. She makes up all kinds of rules and doesn't give me any space. She blabs my business all over the neighborhood." Her mom says, "Emily is physically and verbally abusive with me and her sisters. She has made poor choices in friends and is just out of control—in my face with yelling and cursing."
- Mark and his dad got into an angry wrestling match on the kitchen floor. The dad, outweighing Mark by seventy-five pounds, soon had his son pinned. "Ok, I give up, just let me go!" Mark appealed. They got up and Mark stormed out of the kitchen muttering, "I hate this family. I can't wait to get outta here!" His dad went into the family room, thinking "Lord, what just happened?"

The Importance of Presentation

We are not responsible for the reactions of our teens. At the same time, *the way we approach them* will generally have a direct effect on how they choose to respond to us. Utilizing the principles summarized in this book can dramatically reduce negative reactions, and thus keep the walls from going up. This holds true for teens who *are* angry as a chronic condition and with teens who *get* angry on occasion. Our approach should be essentially the same whether we are dealing with a teen who is angry nearly all the time, or a normally open and sensitive teen who just happens to be angry at the moment. In this book, phrases such as "angry teen" refer to both categories of young person. The concepts

offered here can help you communicate and encourage change in either situation.

A basic principle of this book is that *your first words to an angry teen will strongly push that interaction toward one of two outcomes*: your words being received, thus beginning a conversation, or a *Get outta my face* response, thus shutting it all down. Presentation, the way we approach our teen and start to talk, can make or break effective communication.

A good lesson on the importance of presentation appeared in *The Cosby Show*, whose lead character was Dr. Cliff Huxtable, played by Bill Cosby. In one episode, Cliff's daughter Vanessa had just come home after a semester at college. Out of nowhere, she announced that she was engaged to a young man whom her parents had never met. His name was Dabnes. He was a graduate of the college Vanessa attended, and now worked with its maintenance crew. Half an hour later, Vanessa unexpectedly brought Dabnes into the Huxtables' home to meet the family and have dinner with them.

Dabnes presented himself well. He seemed intelligent and was well-dressed, polite, friendly, and respectful. The problem was Vanessa's surprise announcement and the understandable shock it produced in her parents. Their contempt for the engagement was obvious.

Toward the end of dinner, Dr. Huxtable had the following conversation with Dabnes in an effort to explain why he felt as he did.

"You have a favorite food?"

"Yes sir, what you had here was fine. I especially enjoyed the fish sticks."

"No no, forget the fish sticks. I mean, do you have a favorite food, something that you really, you know, love?"

"Oh yeah. On occasion I enjoy a nice juicy steak."

"Steak! Steak, there you go. You've got the steak. Now just imagine we got the Porterhouse."

"OK."

"Porterhouse, and no white lines in it at all."

“Yeah.”

“Now what would you like to go along with it?”

“Oh, uh, some crispy potatoes.”

“No problem. Now, you got mushrooms. Mushrooms. Do you like your mushrooms?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can smell it, can’t you?”

“Yeah!”

“Can you smell the potatoes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Smell the mushrooms?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sautéed.”

“Smell good?”

“Mm, boy.”

“Mm, hmm.”

“Huh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. Now, I’m going to present it to you, right? I go over. I don’t get a plate.”

“Uh huh.”

“I take the garbage can lid.”

Dabnes falls silent.

“And I turn it upside down after taking it off of the garbage can. I take your steak, your potatoes, and your sautéed mushrooms, and I give it to you. Not too appetizing, is it? *It’s in the presentation.* That’s the way she brought you here. On a garbage can lid.”¹

After offering this little parable, Cliff began mending fences with Dabnes, but the point was made. Vanessa’s unwise, surprising, and alarming announcement had created an unnecessary hurdle in the relationship between her parents and Dabnes. The same dynamic is at work in our parenting and youth ministry. The best and most valuable counsel we can possibly offer to our

teen will be unappetizing if we don't give careful attention to how we present it.

Getting the Conversation Started

Get Outta My Face! shows parents, youth counselors, teachers, and other teen workers how to make contact with the kind of angry, needy young people whom adults most often come across: *those who are not looking for our help*. The following pages discuss some of the key guidance God has given us in his Word for speaking effectively to young adults. Utilizing these principles will often get their attention, hold their attention, eliminate their “push back,” obtain their commitment to change, produce rapid positive change, and provide an entrée to the heart—our most critical target. Sound too good to be true? It would be if these principles were not in sync with how God has made us. It would be if God did not teach us in his Word how to employ these principles. But he has both formed these principles in us, and taught us how to use them for our good.

These principles are not an ironclad guarantee of success with every teen. Like us, teens are individuals made in God's image. They are not some unusually sophisticated machine that can be programmed or managed by behavior modification techniques or verbal gimmicks. There is essentially just one thing that will determine how a particular teen responds to your use of these principles. Ultimately, he will respond *on the basis of what he wants*. The principles shared in this book often work because they allow you to connect to angry and unmotivated teens via the wants and desires of their hearts. Much more will be said about this in chapter 3.

This book has a narrow focus and a limited goal. It does not present a full-scale method of youth counseling or parenting. Nor does it show parents how to hold their teens accountable for their foolish choices. Others have done these things quite well. This book brings principles of the biblical Wisdom Literature primarily to the front end of the conversations you need to have

with angry or complacent teens. Its purpose is to equip parents and others to take the initiative as communicators with teens who probably don't want to talk.

Solomon himself affirms the importance of the approach you will find in this book.

- “The *tongue of the wise commends knowledge* [i.e., makes it attractive or appealing], but the mouths of fools pour out folly” (Proverbs 15:2, emphasis added).
- “The wise of heart is called discerning, and *sweetness of speech* increases persuasiveness” (Proverbs 16:21, emphasis added).
- “The heart of the wise makes his *speech judicious and adds persuasiveness* to his lips” (Proverbs 16:23, emphasis added).
- “A word *fitly spoken* is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11, emphasis added).

Most of us have been on the giving (and receiving) end of the unhelpful counsel illustrated in Proverbs 25:20: “Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.” This out-of-touch kind of talk leaves the young person “cold” or makes him feel like he’s being offered empty, unsubstantial froth.

Get Outta My Face! describes how to get the conversation started with these teens. Part III gives further guidance for making the changes permanent. Permanent change, of course, involves the heart and not just behavior. It’s a “truth” matter that the Spirit alone can bring to lodge in our teen’s heart so that he may be “set free” (John 8:32) from the angry, complacent, self-destructive, and hurtful patterns of his life.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for weak and sinful parents and youth workers, people just like you and me. If you are in any degree limited by

your humanity, affected by your own sinful nature, or troubled by any of your past mistakes in trying to talk to your teen, this book is for you. The principles here are timeless, cross-cultural, cross-gender, and not limited by learning disabilities or ADHD diagnoses. Such factors may need to be taken into consideration, but they do not in the least render the Word of God ineffective.

Bringing our weakness and sinfulness to this process will make it easier to demonstrate genuine respect for the teen we are trying to help. The techniques presented in this book are not a means of manipulating teens. Without genuine respect, however, they can be perceived as manipulation and will likely backfire. The absence of a sincere, humble, and loving regard for the teen can earn charges like, “You are just a hypocrite,” “You are trying to control me,” “You don’t understand me,” or “You just want to use me to do what you want.” The father’s counsel in Proverbs 10:9 is applicable: “Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.” Teens will quickly detect Mom’s, Dad’s, or any counselor’s genuineness by their humility. Let us recall that we are weak people speaking to other weak people, who simply happen to be younger than us. Perfection is not the requirement for building a good communication bridge with our teen. Paul Tripp, in *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens*, tells us how important this consciousness is for parents. “Remember, it is not your weaknesses that will get in the way of God’s working through you, but your delusions of strength. His strength is made perfect in our weakness! Point to his strength by being willing to admit your weakness.”²

More about this openness and how the Lord can use it will come up in chapter 4. It is sufficient to note here that these principles, like the rest of biblical revelation, are for weak, broken, inconsistent, imperfect people who are also redeemed and indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit. Because of God’s grace, despite all our inadequacies, we are able to employ the truths of Scripture to love and help angry and unmotivated young people.

What's in the Rest of This Book

The balance of Part I will present Scripture's true and accurate view of your angry or unmotivated teen, so that you might adopt the biblical view as your own. Part I will also ask you to assess your own heart motives and self-awareness. These opening chapters are foundational. They will set the stage for you to begin a conversation with your teen, even if he doesn't want to talk. The principles set forth in these initial chapters must be in place if you are to withstand the challenges that are likely to come as you apply the process explained in Part II.

Part II is the "how-to" section. Each of its four chapters explains one of the four features that make up the conceptual core of this book. I have used the letters LCLP throughout the book as a way to remember them.

L is for Listen Big
C is for Clarify Narrow
L is for Look Wide
P is for Plan Small

These four chapters explain and illustrate the LCLP principles using a variety of teen and parent vignettes. Several of these narratives are carried on from one chapter to the next so readers may get a more comprehensive sense of how the process works.

The first two parts of this book are concerned exclusively with surface motivations and external behavior. When dealing with angry or unmotivated teens, this is where the process must begin. As Christians, however, we know that this is not where the process ought to end. Changes that are rooted purely in external behavior will not last. Therefore, Part III explains how to use the bridge of communication you will have constructed in Part II to help address your teen's heart issues.

The LCLP principles you will learn in this book can build a surprisingly strong and reliable bridge of communication to your teen. But communication itself is not the ultimate goal. It is merely a means to a much higher and greater goal: to lead your teen to

the cross, whether for the first time or in pursuit of a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the work of Christ.

The goal of any biblical counseling is the glory of God. Christian parents, teachers, counselors, and other youth workers want to see God's name be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done. They want to see the power of the gospel unleashed in teens' lives, that Jesus Christ might become their Pearl of Great Price. That is the aim of this book. May the Wonderful Counselor be pleased to use this tool for his glory as he frees spiritual captives and makes them his own.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

—2 Timothy 2:24–26

2

UNDERSTANDING YOUR TEEN BIBLICALLY

The message on Greg’s office voicemail was from his wife. The topic was a familiar one.

“Greg, would you talk to Sarah again about her attitude and behavior? Please do it this evening if you can. She’s become more and more disrespectful and is doing less and less school work. Whenever I try to talk to her she gets angry and shuts down. If I bring up anything having to do with the Lord, she just rolls her eyes. Please don’t tell her that I called or she’ll be really mad.”

Is there a way Greg can talk to Sarah and elicit something better than a *Get outta my face* response? How could a youth worker* go about helping Sarah?

Can either of them expect Sarah to ask for help on her own? Not likely. Will she be open to talk about the disrespect she has shown toward her mom? Probably not. Is she a Christian? Based

*Throughout this book, “youth worker” will serve as shorthand for any non-family member whose role includes efforts to help teens. This may be a school counselor, youth group leader, youth pastor, or other youth counselor. The assumption is that these youth workers are able to freely discuss the Bible and faith. When I refer either to a Christian school or a youth group setting, please understand that these are interchangeable.

on her attitude, it's hard to tell. Even if she makes a profession of faith, is she motivated to do Christ's will right now and at home and at school? It doesn't look that way.

Is she likely to welcome any discussion about her attitudes and behavior? Or about the things she's doing to hurt herself and others? Or about the example she is setting for her sisters, others at school, or in the youth group? Probably not. Will an immediate attempt to use the Bible to address her attitudes or words of disrespect bring her to a broken and repentant spirit? In all probability, she'll see any such offers "to help" as "just one more lecture" by someone "trying to change me" who "just doesn't understand me."

Angry and unmotivated teens can and do think. But they do not do it with the maturity, responsibility, and spiritual commitment that Christian parents and caring youth workers consider to be vital. Sarah's universe is more circumscribed, and she is at its center. The Bible recognizes this to be true of such seething or simmering young people. But it does not offer us feeble or benign counsel as we face them. It coaches us in skillful ways to talk to them, serve them, and motivate them.

Eight Biblical Lenses for Seeing Our Angry Teens Clearly

Godly wisdom for helping these teens comes through a series of teachings or principles that work like lenses. When we peer through these lenses at our teens we find a way to talk to them, connect with them, and motivate them to make biblically wise choices. When parents or youth workers use the biblically crafted approach explained in this book, angry young people will usually see them as respectful, helpful, and worth listening to. Remarkably, the teens will usually come back for more of the same.

Too good to be true? Not at all. "When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). This is not an absolute promise, of course. Jesus' own life *and death* bears that out. But the principle almost always holds true. If we view our angry teens as God describes them, and if we relate to them as he counsels us, we can be agents of

our teens' peace—in their relationships with other people and in their relationship with God.

1. *Teens, just like parents and counselors, are sinners.*

What a negative way to start!

It may seem so at first. But there is rich hope in an accurate diagnosis. Some time ago a man had a serious gallbladder problem. He was scheduled for surgery, sedated, and operated on. He woke up in the recovery room to discover no abdominal scar, but a shorter leg and large bandage where his left foot had been. A gross misdiagnosis of this man's problem by the attending surgeons and nurses led to a tragic loss for this man and a huge malpractice suit for the doctors and hospital. Misdiagnoses don't just leave real problems unfixed. They usually add new problems that further complicate an already difficult situation.

The Bible affirms that we are sinners. In Romans 3:9–18, the apostle Paul concludes the first section of his letter by piling Old Testament quotation upon quotation to prove this point about us all.

For we have already charged that all . . . are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

What a description! A few verses further on he says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). No teen or adult escapes this declaration. Each of us has broken God's very first command: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). We have erected all kinds of imitation gods for ourselves. We often live contentedly without the Lord or any reference to his purpose. He wants us to live for him and his glory, to be at

his disposal, and to be satisfied with him. Paul urges us all to cast this big net of concern for his glory over all of our choices when he says, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Angry teens (as well as angry parents and youth workers) must recognize that their will is not at the center of any universe except in their own imagination. But that vaunted, seemingly essential, and completely imaginary epicenter is precisely where they have placed themselves. Someone is not respecting *them*, giving *them* what *they* want, appreciating *them*, helping *them*, understanding *them*, or accepting *them*. James acknowledges that this is the source of anger:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.* You do not have, because you do not ask.

—James 4:1–2, emphasis added

If we understand that our teen’s self-absorbed choices, as well our own, give birth to our “quarrels” and “fights,” three very good things can happen. We can stop being defensive. We can stop being idealistic. We can stop being hopeless.

First, we can stop being defensive. We won’t need to jealously protect our own sense of perfection or our teenager’s. Such innocence is a naïve, humanistic illusion; everyone else knows we’re sinners. Looking through the scriptural lens of universal sinfulness allows us to see accurately enough to admit it. We can, do, and will make serious, horrible choices. Don’t be surprised by them. We’re sinners. So are our teens.

Second, we can stop being idealistic. We will recognize that our kids can do any sinful thing that we older sinners can do. Neither parenting, Christian education, heritage, nor fine church involvement can alter anyone’s essential sin nature. To lie, make self-centered choices, be destructive, or be deeply hurtful to oneself or others may be “out of character,” but it is not outside of

any human being's nature. Paul's summary statement in Romans 3:23 makes it clear that every feature of our personality, intellect, emotions, and wills has been infected by sin. Seeing ourselves and our teens as sinners allows us to see everyone more accurately, and helps us resist the temptation to speak with self-righteous condemnation.

Finally, we can stop being hopeless. Seeing our teens as sinners also positions us to aim for the hope of gospel healing in the deepest parts of their being as we interact with them. As this book will emphasize and demonstrate, there is a time to discuss heart issues, repentance, and the richness of Christ's sufficient, gracious acceptance and forgiveness. But that will normally have to follow our initial, respectful conversations that address surface levels. Recognizing our teen's sinful identity, however, does keep us alert to the fact that helping him with anger or motivation is not an end. It is an avenue to his heart for the enduring change that the gospel alone can create.

2. Teens can be respected as young adults.

The Hebrew word *na'ar*, translated "youth" or "young," occurs more than 250 times in the Old Testament. It is usually applied to young people between puberty and their early thirties. Joseph, a seventeen-year-old in Genesis 37:2, and young Daniel and his friends in Daniel 1:4–6 are called *na'ar*. Solomon also used the term for the "youth" to whom he addressed the book of Proverbs (1:4). The counsel he gives in Proverbs is for older as well as younger adults. They both have the same capacities for decision-making and both are accountable for their choices, but the young adults don't have the same freedom that full adults have. That will come with age. They are still under the authority of their parents.

From the wide range of topics Solomon brings to the attention of young adults, it is clear that the teens and "twenty-somethings" he addresses are people who are real and make real choices. Pick any section of Proverbs and scan the topics that Solomon is including for teens to think and decide about. Subjects include

truthfulness and lying, good and harmful friendships, sexual immorality and purity, greediness and generosity, hard work and laziness, integrity and duplicity, good and bad reputations, honor and dishonor to parents and other authorities, helpful and hurtful speech, and variations of these and other topics.

When a parent interacts with an angry young person—let’s call her Sarah—the parent may include large doses of affirmation about the identity Sarah has as a young adult. Sarah can think and she can make choices—real choices. She’s not a child anymore, regardless of how “childish” her choices may seem. Such recognition of Sarah’s young adulthood is not likely to change her right now. However, it does give parents and youth workers the opportunity to speak positively, encouragingly, and accurately to her. This may catch her off guard because of the blame she’s accustomed to hearing, the guilt she’s used to feeling, and the disrespect she so often senses. Affirming her adulthood will affect parent and child, youth worker and teen, and will begin a new process of communication.

3. Common grace, God’s general goodness to all, allows any sinner to make some wise choices.

However horrible Sarah’s behavior is (or, for that matter, any other sinner’s), she is still capable of making wise choices. God has created her in his image, and by virtue of being his human creature she can make good decisions.

It is true that every aspect of Sarah’s character has been infected by sin. Paul made that clear in his letter to the Romans cited above. But it is equally true that God has endowed Sarah and everyone else, believer or unbeliever, and even people within pagan cultures, to make some choices that allow them to live orderly and enjoyable lives. Egyptian sun worshipers could teach Moses culture, literature, mathematics, and management. In God’s time, this knowledge would help Moses to lead Israel. Babylonian officials could teach Daniel and his young teenage friends about the language, culture, law, and government of their pagan captors. Their training would position them to function as significant

civil authorities in that country and put the true God of the Covenant on display before the world of that day. Greek and Roman emperors and governors could create roads, spread peace and education, make international travel possible, and create laws that would later be used to speed the spread of the gospel.

Sarah, too, can make good decisions. She can make poor ones, of course, but the lens of Scripture confronts us with the fact that there is more to a teen than her sinful choices. These sinful choices should not be minimized. But wise interaction with an angry teen will mean that we keep in mind and share our belief with her that she does have the capacity to make wise decisions—if she wants to.

4. God's goodness accounts for "wise wants" that lie (often deeply) within our teens.

People want peace, love, joy, and acceptance by God (or a god). These are some of the "wise wants" that God has wired into our natures. Teens appreciate beauty, fairness, justice, sacrifice, and kindness. They value truthfulness, integrity, loyalty, freedom, and respect. The list of virtues they esteem, to one extent or another, goes on and on. This does not mean they practice these things. Their self-centeredness, like ours, gets in the way of being what they want underneath.

In its naked and unrestrained form, our sin would destroy us and everyone else. But such uninhibited, total abandonment to one's own self-glorification never reaches full flower in any of us. Something restrains us. By common grace, there is in everyone some measure of respect for virtue. Paul refers to this general human desire by noting that "the requirements of the law are written on their [and our] hearts" (Romans 2:14–15). The sense of the moral law of God—that which is right, admirable, and desirable—is imprinted on each of us as creatures of God.

These desires are in angry teens too. In Proverbs 10:4, for example, Solomon says, "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." When parents are urged to reason with their youth about laziness and poverty, they can do

so because the connection between diligence and wealth makes sense to young people. All of the proverbs have assumptions of “wise wants” like this lying beneath them.

One more example may make these assumptions more visible. Solomon’s counsel that “sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (Proverbs 16:21) may make sense to a teen with a caustic, sarcastic tongue because she probably wants to be persuasive. She wants people to see things her way. She’ll be able to compare the effects of the speech and language she uses with the effects that “sweetness” produces.

More will be said in the next chapter regarding this important scriptural assumption about young people. Learning how to tune into these wise wants will set the stage for you to communicate with your teen because you are appealing to what is motivating her—some constructive, God-imprinted desires, whether she recognizes God as their author or not.

5. Help that brings about change in angry teens often begins at a surface level but must aim deeper.

Sarah may want to be out with her friends, whom her mom doesn’t trust. Or she may want to buy a pair of pants that her mom doesn’t consider modest. Let’s assume that some wise wants lie beneath Sarah’s choices. What might those be? For example, Sarah may want to have rich relationships with others, a good reputation among her peers (however she happens to define “good” in this case), or to be treated as a mature, responsible, trustworthy, respectable young adult by her mother. Let’s also assume that Sarah’s mother is able to speak with her daughter in terms of wise wants. If Sarah’s mom reasons with her about the friends or the pants in this way, Sarah may be willing to make some other, better decisions. Thus, an angry interchange may be avoided.

But even though this scenario is preferable to another argument, Sarah’s heart motives have yet to be addressed. Just like the rest of us, her passions and the desires that drive her are linked to the god or gods to which she has wed herself. There is good reason why John concludes his first letter with the command

to “keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). We all have a problem with them.

Ultimately, for Sarah not to be an angry person, she will need to realign her life with the God who is, and submit to his will for her decisions. But that discussion can’t happen effectively right now. Sarah is not ready to talk about her gods, and any such talk is likely to invite a resentful response.

But her mom *can* begin talking about the surface things in Sarah’s life—the things she wants such as the pleasure of relationships, and respect and reputation as a mature person. Jesus did this often. He began with essentially surface-level “felt needs” and then directed the conversation toward more serious heart matters.

How many thousands did Jesus heal, feed, and teach who did not end up following him? He went about doing good, notwithstanding peoples’ responses. In these and other examples, Jesus demonstrated God’s goodness to all humankind. As his followers, we are called to pattern our motives and actions after his. We are called to show love to everyone, even our own angry teens. Our love is not to be conditioned upon the way they respond to us, appreciate us, respect us, or accept us. “Love your enemies . . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 4:44–45). Here, Jesus himself tells us to imitate the Father in the way we meet the surface needs of others.

The book of Proverbs—God’s manual for counseling teens—urges this same generous viewpoint. It suggests that we reach out to foolish, immature, angry, rebellious, lazy, and unconcerned youth at the surface level of their motives with outward, behavior-changing counsel. These are conversations about wise wants.

The ultimate goal is clearly a heart-level “fear of the Lord” which is “the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). This is where our conversations must eventually lead. But the heavy emphasis in Proverbs on external behavior for the purpose of producing certain practical results clearly legitimizes an approach to counseling

that begins with surface concerns. For angry or unmotivated kids, generally this is the only place our efforts can begin fruitfully.

Our love does not sweep under the carpet any of our teen's foolish choices. We must hold them accountable. This book is about how to do that in a respectful way that often opens up communication with them, communication that makes real heart change possible.

6. Teens can and must think about their choices in light of goals and consequences.

Scripture often emphasizes the seriousness of something by repeating it. God only needs to say something once for it to be true, of course, but when God repeats himself once, twice, or several times, we know that this is something he *really* does not want us to miss.

So what does it mean if God says something, in one way or another, more than 250 times? This is exactly what he does when he teaches us through his Word how to make decisions.

Translators of the NIV make it clear that young adults are thinking people. They use many variations of the words “wise,” “prudent,” “understand,” “discretion,” “discern,” “know,” “discipline” (which is related to training and learning), and “instruction.” More than 250 times the writers of Proverbs refer to intellectual activity as indispensable to sound, godly decision-making. In addition, nearly 700 times Proverbs urges teens to think about their choices in light of the positive and negative outcomes of their decisions.

Angry teens *can* think. Proverbs tells us how we can encourage them to do so in a way that will be profitable.

Perhaps you have thought of Proverbs 3:5–6, which tells young people to “lean not on your own understanding.” That, of course, is true. It is quite different, however, from suggesting that young people ought not to *use* their understanding. Indeed, Proverbs 1:8 says “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching,” and Proverbs 3:1 says, “My son, do not forget my teaching.” Proverbs 1:28 warns against hating

knowledge. In other words, teens should be thoughtful and intellectually proactive. The alternative is the intellectual laziness of complacency, and “complacency . . . destroy[s]” (1:32).

None of us should lean on our own understanding. But the Bible is a book of knowledge. It teaches us that certain choices bring about certain consequences. In order to take advantage of this knowledge we obviously must *employ* our understanding.

7. Scriptural principles cover both how to speak and what to say to angry, unmotivated teens.

The Bible’s principles cover all of life. Paul asserts this in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 when he says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Paul tells young Pastor Timothy that Scripture gives him all the resources he’ll need for working with people who are “lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:2–5). This is both a dramatic and a surprisingly accurate description of many angry teens.

In our knowledge of God, he gives us resources for “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). The phrase “life and godliness” encompasses matters involving our relationships with others and our relationship with God. As a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105), God’s Word is truly a resource of illumination. His Word is a resource of life, for we cannot rely upon “bread alone” (Matthew 4:4) for our sustenance. Everything in this creation rusts, rips, breaks, fades, fails, gets moldy, and ultimately disappoints and passes away. But God’s Word is a resource of permanence; it is the exception which “will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35). The Word of God is also a resource of sanctification and character change. Jesus identified the instrument that the Father would use to produce

such change when he prayed, “Sanctify [change] them by your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Truly, every other basis for advice or counsel about living is like urging a loved one to “build his house upon the sand” (Matthew 7:26–27).

The Bible does not teach us to search its pages to see what every nuance of human behavior should look like. It does instruct us, however, to think about how to apply the principles of Scripture in every area of life. When it comes to helping angry teens, the hard work of thinking, careful review of the Scriptures, and thoughtful study belong to the biblical counselor and the thoughtful parent. The fact that we have to think about how to apply the Word of God to specific circumstances does not diminish the richness of God’s revelation in the least. On the contrary, we have reason to marvel at its richness, robustness, sturdiness, and profoundness. God created us as real people with the ability to think about our choices and to make decisions about everything, even our mundane eating and drinking, so that it results in his glory—“whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). The principles of his Word set the trajectory of our thinking in God-pleasing directions, including how to speak to our teens and the sorts of things we need to say. These how-to-speak and what-to-say issues are at the heart of *Get Outta My Face!*

8. God gives us others to support us and to help us counsel our teens.

“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14). The word for “guidance” in this verse is a nautical term. It refers to skill in handling the ropes of a ship. This is also the term used in Proverbs 1:5 describing one purpose of the book of Proverbs: “let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtains guidance.” Proverbs is God’s manual for training us to handle the ropes of parenting young adults—and, of course, of managing ourselves wisely.

Helping angry teens requires several “rope skills”: listening, understanding, communicating respect, and leading toward solutions. Part II of this book will focus on developing these skills. But just as in sailing, more hands than our own may be required to steer the craft safely and effectively. That’s why God intends us to be part of the larger family of his church. In the passage above, Solomon shows the wisdom of having such a set of relationships when he states that “in an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

In every area of the Christian life, growth is a community affair, not a private one. In Romans, Paul states that we are “members one of another” (12:5). In 1 Corinthians, he affirms there are “. . . many parts, yet one body” (12:20). And in Ephesians he explains that “when each part is working properly, [they] make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:16). God has given us a community of brothers and sisters whom he intends us to lean upon for help as we come up against some of the difficulties of parenting teens.

As a teenager, one of our six children pushed Betty and me past the limits of our parental understanding. He was angry, violent, destructive, and disrespectful. All we had learned in raising our four older children seemed to count for nothing. The police, the courts, jail, and even crisis-center people made no impact upon him. Our church, however, played an indispensable role. They encouraged us, supported us in our actions, prayed for us, and stuck with us. They were God’s instrument to alleviate our insecurities and fears, support us when faced with uncertainties about options, and weep and pray for us when we had to make heart-wrenching decisions. At the time when our son clearly became more than we could handle on our own, our family was part of a mainly African-American church. Betty and I are white, and the son with whom we were struggling is African-American. Throughout the entire trauma, our son was never able to use the “race card” as an excuse, rationalization, or accusation. The brothers and sisters in our church leadership team made sure of that. Our local body of Christ was in this with us, and was “in

his face” at the proper times and in the proper ways to hold him accountable.

Your angry teen may push you past the limits of your understanding as well. God’s church is an absolutely vital instrument for your support and growth through these difficult times. Counselors may help. Books like this one may help. Teachers may help. Residential programs may be able to help. But Christ’s church is his designated, primary resource for your support in such challenges—regardless of how your son or daughter responds to your helping efforts.

Stop, Look, Listen: Learn

On January 12, 2007, at 7:51 a.m., world-renowned violin virtuoso Joshua Bell, dressed as a common street musician, played for forty-three minutes at the top of an indoor escalator system serving the L’Enfant Plaza subway station in Washington, DC. An artist who commands more than \$1,000 a minute for his performances, Bell played six classical masterpieces on his \$3.5 million Stradivari-designed violin from the early 18th century. More than 1,000 commuters hurried past Bell. Only a few gave him more than a passing glance, one recognized him from a concert she had been to the night before at the Library of Congress, and a grand total of \$32.17 was tossed into his open violin case. In the presence of greatness, virtually no one recognized him and none honored him as arguably the greatest violinist in the world!

Joshua Bell was part of an experiment sponsored by the *Washington Post* to study how context affects the way people respond to a person or event. In other words, how does *what I’m looking for* affect what I see? Three days before, Bell had sold out Boston’s stately Symphony Hall at \$100 per ticket for a “pretty good” seat, according to the *Post* article. Those concert-goers had been expecting a spectacular artist and were duly rewarded. Indeed, every other time Joshua Bell plays his violin in public, people are astounded. But the busy, chilly commuters on that January morning, coming upon a violinist in jeans and a baseball cap playing

for spare change, allowed their observations to take the path of least resistance. As a result, they saw what they expected to see: nothing particularly noteworthy.

What will you expect to see the next time you talk with your angry teen? If you look through the lenses God holds before us in his Word, you will see what you may not have noticed before, or perhaps have not noticed in a very long time. Rather than the conversational equivalent of hurrying past on your way to something more important you will stop, and look, and listen. This is someone whom God expects you to approach with love and respect and wisdom and thoughtful, careful, honest, biblical speech. When your teen senses that attention and regard from you, you can expect the uncommon reward of attentiveness. That is how the door begins to open, how the walls begin to come down, and how you can start to get past the *Get outta my face* response.