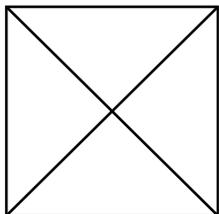


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1

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