

Reaching a Wayward Child

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | January 8, 2012



Dear Dr. Jennings,

Would you be kind and provide information on the topic of how to reach my one and only son, who is lost and still in the "PIG PEN" like a prodigal son but does not make an effort or has the will to change his life. He does not appear to have vision for his life or willingness to listen to any advise.

I have been praying over 20 years for salvation and it is heart breaking to watch my son being so lost and so weak.

Please help if you can.

Your struggle and heartache is not yours alone. Millions of parents are also longing to see a wayward child experience the joys of intimacy with Christ and transformation of character His presence brings. I wish I had some secret truth that could be applied which would *guarantee* success, unfortunately,

because each person has freewill, such a commodity does not exist.

We must recognize no matter how great our love and heartache for a child, God's love and desire for their salvation is infinitely more intense than our own. Yet, even God cannot save a soul against the will of that individual, else everyone would be saved.

As a starting point we must know God is for our children. God longs more intensely for your child than you have capacity to experience and God will provide all that is needed to reach and save your child. With this knowledge in mind one never has to "plead" with God to get Him oriented toward saving your child, or interested in saving your child, or willing to save. He already is.

Instead our conversations with God should pursue wisdom, ability, and insight into any action that we can take that would be a positive influence for our loved one toward God's kingdom. Further, we must reach out to God with an eternal perspective and pray "take the gloves off," meaning "God do whatever it takes to shake my child out of their lethargy, complacency or stupor."

Recognize, this is, from an earthly perspective, a dangerous prayer. What if the only way that your child will be shaken into reexamining their life is to end up in prison? Would you be at peace with that? What if the only way to awaken your child to think about eternal realities is if they get cancer? Or if you get cancer? Would you be okay with that?

God's perspective is that of eternity. He knows the secrets of each heart and He knows whether a heart remains open or is permanently closed. He also knows what will motivate a person to "reconsider" their situation and can bring this to bear. But God doesn't force His way into a person's life against their will. God is constantly working for the salvation of every human being, but within the framework of His character and principles. This means God, who grants us genuine freedom, respects the person who tells Him to leave them alone, but He also respects the prayer of the mother who asks He go intercede in her behalf, thus our prayers open avenues for God into the lives of our family and friends.

Our prayers also open our minds to God's influence and allow us to grow in grace and love and wisdom to become more effective conduits of God's love and grace.

With all of this in mind, from my experience, here are some of the obstacles I have observed in individual lives that keep them from surrendering their lives to God?

- Misperception of God - Ask a person to tell you about the God they don't believe in or trust. You might find the God they describe doesn't deserve to be believed in. Then ask God for wisdom to help reveal the truth about God.
- Ignorance of His law - Most people have accepted some aspect of an Imperial Roman Imposed law idea for God's law. If one believes God imposes law like Rome, then one will draw all kinds of distortions about God, which undermine trust, like God must impose penalties to punish law breakers etc. As we see the truth that God's law is the design template for life, and violations are incompatible with life, as God designed it, then we realize God's interventions are to heal and save from our own terminal condition and not to inflict punishment.
- Accepting lies about our existence (evolution) - A dialogue regarding the multiple false assumptions that underpin this thinking can be beneficial to cause cognitive dissonance and open the mind to consider the truth about God.

- Unresolved anger – Individuals who have been mistreated often have anger and trust issues that they blame upon God and have not been able to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the reality of their own abusive mistreatment. Such questions need to be resolved in order to come back to a relationship with God.
- Complacency, laziness, entrenched habits – Often the only antidote to this is harsh reality. As Paul said, those who do not work shall not eat.
- Unhealthy attachments to things or people, unwillingness to go through loss that change brings – Exploring the evidence of how the unhealthy attachments have brought pain, suffering, destruction can bring the insight needed to initiate a change. However, the person may still, despite the understanding of the need to cut certain relationships, still experience grief and loss. Validate and give permission to grieve the loss.
- Loss of hope (believe lie have gone to far, committed unpardonable sin) – Provide assurance that if one has this concern, fear, anxiety, that such concern is itself evidence they have not committed the unpardonable sin. Explore with them what they believe is so horrible and then love them and demonstrate that your love is not dependent upon their behavior, but that their behavior changes and impacts themselves.
- A hardened heart – One can only be patient, kind, loving and gentle, praying God's interventions to reach such a one. Remember, "it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance." As we can love those who hate us we can be effective witnesses to a God such a person has never known. This takes a personal experience with God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – a daily surrender of self to God.

With a prayerful heart inquire of God for wisdom regarding any obstacles that hinder your child from reexamining their relationship with God, and if there are any actions you can take to address those obstacles. If there is no known specific action you can take that would positively influence your child, then ask God to bring whatever is necessary into your child's life to shake them out of their complacency and give opportunity for reexamination of their life and heart. And always remember – God loves and longs for your child even more than you!