

## Session 12: When Kids Walk Away from the Faith

### How to respond when your kids are in the Far Country...

A lot is written today about the *dones* ([Who Are the Dones and Why Should We Care?](#)) Also called the "dechurched" or "disenfranchised", these people are done with organized religion. They were once happily



involved in church, but became disenchanted. So they quit. Many of them say they are spiritual, but not religious.

Surveys show that Gen Zs and Millennials make up the biggest percentage of *dones*. The future doesn't bode well when less than 11% of U.S. church attendees are under the age of 30, and 60% are over the age of 50. Even worse, 65% of church youth abandon religion after they leave home. If you are an evangelical grandparent, there is a 90% chance that one or more of your adult children is a *done*, and two or more of your grandkids are *nones* (meaning they have no Faith).

Maybe you are one of this growing number of grandparents in an increasingly secular age. Few things are more heart-wrenching to a Christian parent or grandparent than a child who abandons the Faith. Parents want to know, "Why?" "What went wrong?" "What did I do to cause this?" Or, "What could I have done to prevent it?" Their pain is multiplied





when fellow church members become critical or judgmental. Too often, parents of rebellious children are asked to step down from ministry leadership. In the process, they are left with guilt, shame and humiliation. They wonder, "Can I ever serve God again after I've failed as a parent?" Grandparents may be spared a parent's sense of failure, but they still suffer heartache and anxiety from seeing those they love most walking the wide and easy road to destruction. What

would Jesus say to parents and grandparents of prodigals?

**1. Jesus would say, "Stop beating yourself up. You're in good company."**

He might point to biblical examples of godly parents whose children were ungodly. Adam and Eve raised Cain, Abel and Seth, but the oldest of these, Cain, murdered his own brother. Moses was a towering man of God, but his two sons incited the Israelites to worship Canaanite gods [Judges 18:30]. Eli was the high priest, but his sons were corrupt priests who stole the offerings and sexually abused the tabernacle virgins. [2 Sam. 2:12-36] Samuel was one Israel's greatest prophets, but his sons were corrupt judges. [1 Sam. 8:1-6] Job was a man of impeccable integrity, but he constantly worried about his kids' wild parties. [Job 1:5] David was a giantkiller, but he couldn't control his rebellious children. Solomon was renowned for wisdom, but his boys were foolishly wicked. Hezekiah was Israel's godliest king, but his son Manasseh was its wickedest.

Jesus might retell us one of his favorite stories: the one about two prodigal sons, the wild younger brother and dutiful older one. [Lk. 15] Both brothers went into far countries of their own. When Jesus spoke of the father who watched both of his boys abandon his faith, he was really talking about our heavenly Father. He has watched billions of sons and



daughters desert him. If we judge parents by their children, then our heavenly Father is the greatest failure of all. Yet, we know that's not true.

Jesus would say, "Maybe you could have done better as a parent or grandparent, but it's of no value to flagellate yourself. My heavenly Father knows your pain. And he never disqualified his servants because of their rebellious children, nor is he through with you.

## **2. Jesus would say, "I don't condemn you, so don't condemn yourself."**

Jesus would remind you of what he said to the Jewish religious leader, Nicodemus: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn



the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned..." [Jn. 3:17&18] Jesus didn't come to die on a cross so that you'd wallow in condemnation. St. Paul wrote, "There is *now* no condemnation for those

who are in Jesus Christ..." [Rom. 8:1] That's what the woman caught in the act of adultery discovered when Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." [John. 8:1]

Maybe you blame yourself for your kids walking away from the Lord. You torture yourself with, "What if I had been a better parent?" Perhaps your children blamed the way you brought them up for turning their back on Jesus or his Church. Okay, maybe you did mess up raising your kids. Or, as grandparents, you made mistakes bringing up the parents of your grandkids. Jesus would remind you of something St. John wrote: "If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive our sins..." [1 Jn. 1:9] So 'fess up your mess ups, and move on from the past to a more productive future.



As he showed with that woman taken in adultery, he wants us to move beyond our checkered past and into a more productive future. Those of

us who are grandparents have made it to the fourth quarter of our lives. Maybe we are even in sudden death overtime. Yet, while there is time left, we can hope that our final quarter will be the best yet. Jesus would say, "Don't let condemnation from the devil or other people, or even your own self-condemnation, for past mistakes and sins, be a ball and chain



that slows you down in what should be the most productive quarter of your life.

**3. Jesus would also say, "It's not your place to get them back. So get out of the driver's seat and let me take the wheel."**

The Lord would remind you of something he said to the crowds some 2,000 years ago: "No one can come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws them..." [Jn. 6:44] He might add, "And no one will come back to me unless the Father draws them back." Perhaps he would put a reassuring hand on your shoulder and jog your memory about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only caused your wandering loved one to be born again when they first came to Christ, he also remains in them because they were "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise who is the guarantee of [their] inheritance..." [Eph. 1:13&14] The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit is the reason Jesus could promise, "All the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast away." [Jn. 6:37]

Jesus would say to you, "My Father, the Spirit, and I have got this. We never lose those we bring to salvation. They may wander for a while, but the Triune God never loses track of them. So you can relax. It's not your job to bring them back. It's ours, and ours alone!" The





Lord might look deeply with eyes that penetrate your very soul and ask the question, "Do you really trust me?" Dear one, maybe for you the biggest issue isn't whether your loved one comes back to Jesus, but whether or not you trust him to be your Lord and their Savior. Not *if* they return, but whether or not you keep your faith in Jesus' promises.

Will you depend on the Holy Spirit or resort to your own human flesh? You can't manipulate, push, shove, badger, or harp at them to come back to Jesus or his Church. If they are in the Far Country, only the Triune God can bring them to their senses and back home. Jesus said that the flesh cannot give birth to the spirit. [Jn. 3:6-8] But there are three powerful things you can do to aid in their return: 1) Pray for them unceasingly; 2) Love them unconditionally; 3) and live for Christ with integrity. Let them see Jesus in you. When the Far Country dismantles and disillusion them (as it always will), they will remember what they've seen in you as something far better.



**4. Jesus would also tell you, "God has no grandchildren, but only children. Your kids can't get to heaven on your ticket."**

You have the privilege and joy of having grandchildren. God

doesn't. He only has sons and daughters. We can only come to God through a personal relationship with his One and Only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus would remind us of what he said to his disciples in the Upper Room, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [Jn. 14:6] He doesn't say that they can come to the Father through the faith of their parents or grandparents. Our faith is uniquely and only ours. Our children can never claim it as their own. They must have a personal and intimate relationship with Christ alone. Like us, they must be his sons or daughters. God has no grandchildren!



This idea of a grandfathered faith is particularly dangerous to covenant kids (by that I mean those who are baptized or dedicated to God when they are children). They grow up in the church, feeding off the faith of grownups, singing the songs that have been handed down through the ages, and soaking up the truths of God's Word by osmosis. And here's the danger: they can reach adulthood thinking that it's their personal faith, when, in fact, they are only carrying the secondhand faith of their fathers, mothers, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, or grandparents.



They might be like Moses. When he was a baby, he was nursed at the breast of his mother. Until he was weaned, she must have shared with little Moses about the God of Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob. But after being weaned on his mother's milk and faith, he was raised in the palace of an Egyptian Pharoah. By the time we see him again at age 40, he looks like an Egyptian, walks like an Egyptian, and talks like an Egyptian. He had exchanged the faith of his parents for the gods of Egypt. It wasn't until he was a fugitive on the run, and spent 40 years on the desolate deserts of the Sinai, that he met God in a burning bush at age 80. It was only then that he picked up the faith of his fathers and mothers, and made it the basis of his own personal relationship with God. Like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, Moses had been in a Far Country of his own. But our heavenly Father found him and drew Moses to himself.



It's important for us to know that, no matter how much we protect our children and grandkids, Pharoah will ultimately get his claws into them. Most of them will have a faith crisis and drop their parents' faith. For some, it may only be days or months. For others, like Moses, it may be for years. That's when it's the toughest for believing parents and grandparents. Joyce and I held each other at night as we prayed for our daughter. I can't tell you how many tears we

shed. But we never lectured or badgered her to come back to the faith of her childhood. It was ten long years before she picked up the Faith again. But this time it was hers, not ours.

Maybe you are going through such a time as this. Your children or grandchildren have abandoned the faith of their childhood years. Look at it this way: when they pick it up again, it will be their personal faith and not yours. So, look beyond the painful vale of your tears to a brighter tomorrow, when they pick up again what they have laid down. They may rearrange it a little, but it will be theirs. Through your time of sorrow, remember this promise: "...weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." [Ps. 30:5]

#### **5. Jesus would say, "I created a special story just for you."**

Jesus told his most famous parable about a brokenhearted father whose two boys ran off to the Far Country. [Lk. 15] St. Augustine said the



Far Country is not so much a geographical place as it is a spiritual one. To be far from our Father's heart is to be in the Far Country. The youngest son was a wild child who ran off to a place of carnal delights. The oldest was a dutiful son, who, though he remained in his

father's house, was far from the old man's heart. Both were prodigal sons.

When Jesus tells the story of the waiting father, he is talking about his Father in heaven who waits for his lost sons and daughters to come home to him. But he might as well be telling your story too; the story of every broken-hearted parent and grandparent whose next generation loved ones are not walking with Jesus. And in that story he gives three principles that are critical to bringing our children or grandkids home from their far country:

#### **1) The Father let the far country to do its work.**

He waited at the gate, looking down yonder road for his younger son to come home. He must have



wept as he waited. Surely he prayed. But he didn't go down to the Far Country to rescue his boy. When Far Country bled his son dry, and he was left penniless, his dad didn't send him extra money to keep his head above water. When the boy's Far Country fair weather friends deserted him, and he was forced to care for swine (a most shameful thing for a Jewish boy), his father didn't come running to rescue him from the pig pen. When the starving kid wallowed in the mud, wrestling pigs for their



food, the old man stayed at the gate. We might think him hard-hearted. We would probably go down and rescue our wandering loved ones, or at least help them pay their bills. We are so prone to

enabling them. But this father was wiser than most of us.

The story takes a dramatic turn when we read, "When he came to his senses..." [Lk. 15:17] What brought the boy to his senses? It was the Far Country. The Far Country promises so much, but it ultimately strips us of everything. If we just wait, we can trust it to do its work. This much is true: the more we enable our kids, the longer they will stay in the Far Country. It takes great faith to believe that, though they are far from us, and our faith, Jesus is with them. He promised, "I will never leave nor forsake you." He didn't abandon Adam and Eve after they sinned. He watched over Moses all those years he was in the desert. He was with Jonah in the belly of the great fish. His love for us took him all the way to a cross to rescue God's lost sons and daughters. So trust Jesus, and let the Far Country do its work.

## **2. The father did his work before his son ever left.**

The second thing we see from Jesus' story is that when he came to his senses, the younger son remembered the love and grace that he had seen and received in

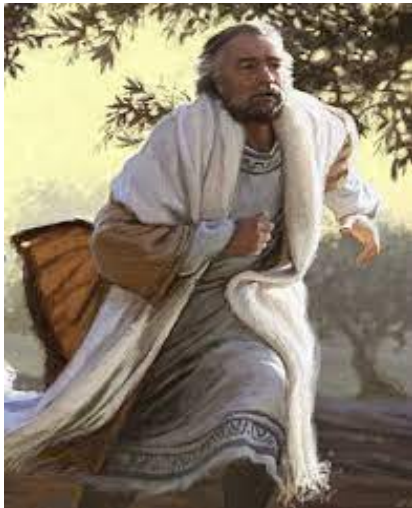




his father's house while growing up. He said to himself, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare and here I am starving to death. I will get up and go back to my father..." [Lk. 15:17&18] We don't know whether our children will go into the Far Country, but we do know that we must prepare for that possibility beforehand. That's why it is critical that we raise our kids with unconditional love and amazing grace.

This is why grandparents are crucial. Parents are the coaches. They make the rules, discipline their kids and keep order. Their job is to build and prepare their children for the challenges of life. It's hard for coaches to communicate unconditional love. They have to play by the rule, "I'm not your friend, I'm your parent." But grandparents don't have to play by that rule. We really can be their friends. We are their cheerleaders. Chances are, as they remember their warm experiences with us as children, they will make a beeline for us when they return from the Far Country.

Memories of love will remind our kids that our homes will offer them so much when they see the folly of their Far Country misadventures. The boy was scared. All the way home he rehearsed the story that he thought might pull at the heartstrings of his father. But when he arrived,



he said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be your son." [Lk. 15:21] This was true repentance. Notice that he first made things right with God. He understood what we should all realize: none of us are worthy of being his son or daughter. Then he made things right with his father. Again, we must allow God, as he works through the Far Country, to bring our kids home.

### **3. The father welcomed his returning son with unrestrained love.**

This is the most amazing part of the story. The father pulls up his robes and runs toward his returning son. Socrates said that men of distinction should never run in public. This man didn't care about dignity. As he later shouted, "Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." [Lk. 15:23&24] The returning son tries to blurt out his apology, but his father will not hear it. Though his face is caked with mud from the pig pen, and his ragged clothes still carry the lingering smell of pigs and the cheap perfume of Far Country prostitutes, his father throws his arms around him and

smothers his face with kisses. His infectious joy knows no bounds. Soon the whole place is party city.

Aren't we glad that the older brother was not at the gate to greet his younger brother? The boy would have been met with a gate shut in his face and a string of condemning words. Too often it's the older brother who meets returning sinners at the door of the church house. This is also a story of how our heavenly Father and his angels respond when a single lost son or daughter comes home.



Do you catch the excitement of the father's commands? "Kill the fattened calf!" [vs. 22] Our heavenly Father gave his own Son as a sacrificial lamb so that we could come home. "Quick, bring a robe and put it on him!" [vs.22] Our father put the robe of Christ's righteousness on us to cover the shame of our Far Country sins. "Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet!" [vs. 22] That was the family ring, signifying that he had never lost his place in the father's home or family. So it is with us when we return to our heavenly family. It is as if we had never been gone. Servants went barefoot, but the sons and daughters of the house never did. Though we have wallowed with the pigs, we will forever be sons and daughters of the King! If this is how our Father in heaven treats prodigals when they come home, shouldn't we do the same? This story is a gift for you and me from the amazing grace of our Lord and Savior.



**6. Jesus would say, "Don't assume all is well just because your kids or grandkids are in the Father's house."**

Jesus doesn't overlook the brother

who stayed home. Remember, he told this story of two prodigal sons when he was with the tax collectors and prostitutes, and was rebuked by religious leaders. The notorious sinners at table with him are the younger brothers and sisters in the Far Country. But the temple boys think they are home free because they live and work in the Father's

house of worship. When Jesus tells the story of the older brother, he is looking directly at the religious do-gooders.

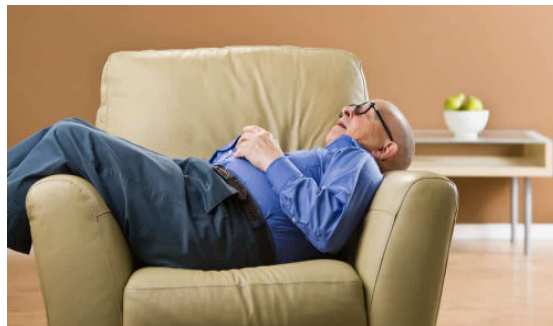
We often focus on the prodigal son in the Far Country without realizing the older son was in a Far Country of his own. While the younger boy was far from his father's holiness, the older was far from his father's heart of grace. It is possible to be in the church house, singing praise songs to the Father, and doing lots of work for him, while still being far from his heart. We might be fooled by the fact that the older son is working hard in his Father's fields. Or that he is dutiful. Or that



he keeps all the rules. He never reveals his true heart until his younger brother comes home. When he is invited to join the party, he spews out a lifetime of hidden resentment. "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never once disobeyed your orders. Yet, you never gave me even a young goat so I could

celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him." [Lk. 15:29&30] Notice, he never refers to the one who has returned as his brother. Instead, he is "...your son..."

Watch out for those telltale signs in your religious children and grandkids. Are they grateful to the heavenly Father for all he has given them? Do they understand that all they have is undeserved and a gift of God's grace? Are they just going through the motions, or do they have a dynamic and intimate personal relationship with their Father in heaven. Are they happy when God showers his grace on others, or resentful that they weren't the recipients? Are they judgmental and self-righteous when it comes to sinners in the world? Do they have a heart to reach their lost brothers and sisters for Christ?



At Legacy Imperative, we are often shocked at grandparents who say, "My children and kids are Christians and in church. We don't need to go to your Summits, or look at your tool box, or take your small group training. Everything is alright in our family, thank you very much." How foolish! Or how lazy to assume all is well and will remain well. Satan is

on the loose, like a lion looking to devour God's people. We not only need to pray that our wayward loved ones will come home, but we must also



disciple young people in the church so that they won't be among the 65% who abandon the Faith after they head off to college.

### 7. Jesus would say, "There are plenty of folks in the Far Country that you can reach."

Jesus would remind you that his parable of the prodigals is his story as well. He is actually the third brother in the story. Though the story never mentions him by name, he is in every line. The father waited by the gate for his son to come home. As parents

and grandparents, we are the last people on earth who can go and plead with our children or grandkids to come back to the Faith.

But the older brother should have gone to the Far Country to rescue his brother for three reasons: **1) He should have loved his father enough to do it.** He watched his father's heart break. He heard his cries as he knelt by his bed to pray. He saw his dad walk down to the gate and stand there for hours, looking anxiously down the road. That should have motivated him to go to the Far Country, and plead, "Dad's heart is breaking. Please, brother, come home." **2. He should have loved his brother.** That alone should have motivated him to go there and plead, "Brother, I love you. Please come back home with me." **3. He had the resources to go.** Two-thirds of everything his father possessed had been given to him as an inheritance. He had all that he needed to go and bring his brother home. But he didn't.



However, Jesus was the third brother. He saw the broken heart of his Father in heaven. He left his Father's home, traveled across the galaxies, and became a two-celled zygote in Mary's womb. He came to seek and to save all those who were lost in the Far Countries of this world. He paid the ultimate price to bring his Father's lost sons and daughters home.

And he calls us to do the same. As grandparents, we are the older brothers and sisters. If we love our heavenly Father, and the lost sons



and daughters of God (who are really our brothers and sisters too), and will use the resources our Father has generously given us, we can do what Jesus did. So, while you wait for those you love most to come home to Jesus, spend your time looking for other prodigals. Jesus might even recommend Legacy Imperative as one of his tools to help prepare you to do just that!

*A talk given by Dr. Robert Petterson, Founder and President of Legacy Imperative [legacyimperative.org] in his "Sharing Jesus in a 'Woke' Culture" series at Covenant Church of Naples, Fl.*