

## Chapter 1

### Smile - Maybe He Isn't Calling From Jail

Keep the faith.

Stay upbeat.

Smile.

Be happy.

Be Kind.

Count your blessings.

Never give up.

It could be worse.

You've heard these words a million times, but never were they more unwelcome than now, as you sit at the kitchen table mulling over your child's latest disaster. Typically, there's no need putting a name to the crisis—they are always different, each one seeming a little more problematic than its predecessor. John has been arrested for stealing. You've just come home from the police station. Tiffany has been using the latest fad drug. You were the one who found her stash. Lonnie has posed for pornographic photos which were somehow discovered by the law. Cory has been expelled from school for carrying a gun in his backpack. Sunny has pushed the results of a pregnancy test in front of you. It's positive. Chad has hesitantly revealed his sexual preference. There's no way you can tell his father.

Tristin has been arrested. They think he killed someone, and you're afraid he might have. It is, in fact, this "fear" that seems to be the underlying factor in all your emotions these days.

"The older Todd gets, the less we can do to undo the damage; or to protect him from himself. The stakes get higher," one father confided in a moment of sorrowful stress.

How well you understand.

On the other hand, your situation may not be at all so dramatic. Maybe you're simply dealing with Jason who lies, or Katy who refuses to come home at curfew.

Perhaps it's Allison, who blatantly cheats on exams, or Damien who sneaks out of the house at night to smoke with friends. It could even be that you're struggling with 42-year-old Greg who won't get a job, and insists upon living with you, or 50-year-old Margie whose drug problems have taken the family on a series of roller coaster rides for the past 30 years. Perhaps it's just the overwhelming sadness of being a parent to a grown child who no longer wants to share his life or the joy of his children with you.

Whatever your particular problem is, the fact of the matter remains that something went terribly wrong in your family dynamics, and you're not sure what or how it occurred. Until now, you've equated problem children with bad parenting. But suddenly, you're confused. You don't see yourself as such a bad parent. As far as you know, you've never been unloving, uncaring or unfit. You feel pretty sure that you taught the right values---and you know for a fact that you've had your child in church and held him in your prayers right next to your heart. At the same time, moments like this make your ego look around for an event or a person to blame, and with society telling us that "it's all caused by something Mom and Dad didn't or did do," this little part of you pushes itself to the forefront to be cleared of all fault. You immediately start to examine every little action---every little nuance of your parenting life--- for the culprit of your problem, but quickly discover that it's impossible for you to remember just what kind of a parent you really have been.

You're no longer sure if you were truly strong, authoritative, and unyielding in the things that mattered. You're no longer sure if you touched enough, praised when

appropriate or listened with both ears. You wonder if you disciplined correctly---were not too lax or too strict. Even when you suspect that someone else such as the school is at fault, you wonder what you could have done or said that would have made a difference.

And how about God? Where was he in all of this you want to know? Better yet, where is he now? Suddenly your thinking becomes a kaleidoscope of contradictions, and you begin toying with the idea that perhaps God could have made things turn out differently if only you had been the right kind of parent---the kind of parent he wanted you to be. Whatever that was. If only he had loved you as much as you thought he did. If only you had been lovable enough for him to favor you with his love.

Your mind rocks with emotions so varied, you don't know what to address first. Should you try to curb your anger? Seek comfort for your hurt? Try counseling for your fears? Concentrate on good health habits to remedy your stress? Look for deeper religion in a different church? How can you possibly know what to do next, when your child seems to have destroyed both his life and yours with a single thoughtless act carrying unredeemable consequences?

Now take a deep breath and as you exhale, allow yourself to envision all these troubling thoughts leaving you with exhalation. The picture is not as formidable as you may have thought, because life is not always what it seems. Ironically, though most of us intellectually acknowledge this statement as true, few of us take the time to examine life

events with the kind of questions that would enable us to prove it so. Perhaps this is because, stepping outside of the comfortably “known” requires us not only to think differently, but to see differently and act differently. It asks us to question the status quo—maybe even challenge religious and social dogmas that have been in place and served as a guiding light throughout the ages of man.

Yet, when we do choose to view life through this different perspective and agree to let go of at least a few of those long-formed opinions, life becomes less threatening, less nonsensical and easier to live. What’s more, we find ourselves privileged to take part in a new spiritual drama, unfolding not in churches or other religious arenas, but in the heart of the human family itself. Remarkably, we are allowed to see that the essence of truth Jesus spoke about in the Bible was not in “thinking new thoughts,” “fighting spiritual demons,” or even in “performing spectacular miracles.” In the end, when all was said and done, Jesus surprised his followers with a truth, that while famously profound, was also so simple in concept, that it is uniformly overlooked in favor of more complicated, high-sounding theology. The essence of this powerful truth is love.

The directions for finding your way to this truth and making it work for you are easily stated. See only with the eyes of love. Speak only with the voice of love. Act only in the ways of love. When we follow these tenets, the situation that now causes you to sit at the table with your head in your hands stops being a tragedy and becomes an opportunity to do what you were created to do; what you have been commanded to do; what you know how to do, whether you realize it now or not---and that is love. More

than blame, more than criticism, more than judgment and certainly more than anger---this is a moment that needs your love.

Perhaps you think I'm making light of a very serious problem in your life, and that this is not what you needed to hear right now. If so, let me assure you, I have sat in your seat at that very table of despair. I know what you're feeling, but I happen to have encouraging news. I have discovered that Jesus comes to us in these human moments, where it is often easier to see him than it is in the perfect ones. Perhaps this is because, from the beginning, God came down to our human level to teach us about love. He introduced his child to the world in a human form we would recognize and understand---a child who would bring dramatic changes to the human-family at large. Children are like that. They force us to change through learning and loving, and this is what can happen to you now.

No, it's not the life you once dreamed of. So far, your parenting experience has been like a vacation gone bad. Instead of the happy, picture-perfect postcard memories, you've been left with the flat tires and wrong turns. It's not where you wanted to go. But sometimes God brings us to places we don't want to be in order to teach us the lesson we are supposed to learn.

So, step back and look again at the situation in front of you, but this time, from a different perspective. Instead of feeling unfairly attacked, consider yourself special--- consider yourself loved--- you have just been handed proof that God is not through with you, yet. He has come to you through your child with the promise of your personal

growth. He's not asking you to solve the problem, or change the scenario. That part is in his hands and under his complete control. He is simply challenging you to love.

It is in keeping with this challenge, that I offer a collection of positive ideas shared in the spirit of love. It isn't a book that has to be read front to back, but one that may be worked through at any pace that feels good, starting on any page that seems right. It's been said that the deepest connection between people is the recognition of mutual knowledge---an inner knowing of what the other person is going through. As you consider each idea presented here, remember that you and I are "knowing" friends, and my love follows you with support on the journey ahead.

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

*Luke: 1: 46-48*