

“Pastor, how do I love my rebellious teen?”

May 31, 2016 by Sam Hodges

I said I will always love [my daughter] Hannah, but I didn't always like Hannah,” shares Rhonda. “Anything I asked her to do, she wanted to do the opposite. She was angry at life. She was not a pleasant child at all.

“The emotional outbursts—it was hard. I had to come to a place where I would have to say to her, ‘You need to go into another room; we can't talk about this now.’ Otherwise it would have ended up in a screaming match.”

Rhonda described her daughter as a “minefield in the backyard: you walk out and you never know when you're going to walk in the wrong place.”

Parents of rebellious teens are often weary and in need of advice on how to respond to their children. [First Corinthians 13:4–7](#) is a great passage to walk these parents through. It helps them assess their response to their children and provides the basis for loving responses to their teens' behavior.

Let's look at a few common struggles of parents with rebellious teens and see what [1 Corinthians 13](#) says to them.

Their relationship with their teen has grown cold

After an extended season of dealing with a rebellious teen, many parents don't have warm fuzzies when they think about their child. Some get to the point where they even question their love for their children. And that produces internal conflict because the parents know they are supposed to love their teenager.

[First Corinthians 13:4–7](#) helps parents take the focus off manufacturing feelings of love and shows them how to practically demonstrate it.

They are suffering

Dealing with a teen's disobedience can be exhausting—staying up late worrying whether a child will come home; regular interactions with the police or social workers; taking time off from work for court hearings; and don't forget the daily conflict with the child, plus all of the other responsibilities the parents have toward their other children.

In addition, dealing with a rebellious child can tax parents emotionally. They have to deal with losing friends who are troubled by what's going on in their home; the loss of career opportunities they don't have the time or energy to pursue; the loss of time to devote to hobbies; the loss of argument-free family dinners or crisis-free family vacations; and even the gradual loss of the hopes and dreams that they once had for their child.

Some parents aren't even aware of the variety of ways their teen's behavior is affecting them. Helping them make those connections can be helpful. It aids parents in understanding why life feels so out of control. And it makes them more aware of the particular ways in which they are suffering. It also can help them to see the variety of circumstances in which they can love (and are called to love) their child by being patient (longsuffering) with him or her ([1 Cor. 13:4](#)).

They experience repeated temptations to be unkind

It's easy for conversations to get short with rebellious children. It's easy for parents to stop serving the child the way they used to. It's easy to stop being courteous—not apologizing for the everyday minor inconveniences they cause their children (for example, being a few minutes late to pick them up). Parents may even be sniping at each other—blaming each other for being too strict or too lenient. But love is kind ([1 Cor. 13:4](#)).

“Kind” means to provide something beneficial for someone as an act of kindness.¹ With that in mind, here are a few helpful questions you can ask the parents who struggle with rebellious children:

- What are three practical ways you can show kindness to your child by helping or serving him or her this week?
- How can you show your spouse kindness this week?
- Do you need to ask your child or your spouse for forgiveness because of unkind words or other actions?

Also remind parents that God uses kindness to bring about repentance ([Rom. 2:4](#)). Parents should emulate His strategy.

They are often discontent

When going through difficulty, the grass often looks greener on the other side. So don't be surprised if the parents are tempted to envy the children of other families. A wife can be tempted to envy someone else's husband whom she perceives to be a better disciplinarian or more involved in his child's life. A husband can be tempted to envy the couple whose kids are out of the house. But love does not envy.

Here are a few questions you could ask parents to begin a discussion on issues related to contentment:

- Is there anything that you presently don't have that you think would make this situation better? If so, what?
- Do you think it's possible for you to be content during this season? What would that look like?
- How does a lack of contentment intensify your suffering during this season?
- What do you think God is trying to produce in you by not allowing you to have what you want right now?
- How might being envious of another person's spouse erode your relationships with your own spouse? How is it unloving to him/her/others?

Help parents understand that contentment is something that can be learned ([Phil. 4:12](#)). And that the key is understanding that God gives us the strength to do all the things He has called us to endure—including suffering ([Phil. 4:13](#)).

They often find themselves in situations that escalate into severe conflict

Love isn't rude. You might think that's another way of saying that love is kind. But it's not. "Rude" means culturally inappropriate or unbecoming behavior that would bring shame or disgrace.² This would include public arguments, physical fights. Parents need to know that they should do everything in their power ([Rom. 12:18](#)) to de-escalate conflict before it gets to that point. You may need to teach them some basic conflict resolution principles ([James 4:1–3](#)).

So how do they avoid such blow-ups? One way is to remember that "love does not insist on its own way" ([1 Cor. 13:5](#) RSV).

Parents often assume that because of their love for their child, their life experience, and their child's behavior, what they want is best or the only way a conflict can be resolved. And while they are the authorities in their home, this truth is still in play.

Here are a few ways you can help parents realize that there may be other ways to approach the issue.

- Encourage the parents to learn about and [model their parenting after God's parenting](#).
- Connect the parents with other parents in the church who have different rules or approaches to parenting. Encourage them to go out for lunch and have the couple

you're working with ask the other couple questions about how they've handled parenting issues.

- Ask the parents if they've ever asked their children for their input in resolving the conflict.
- Sometimes you may need to affirm parents' goals but ask them to consider other strategies for achieving them.
- Perhaps the parents need to consider alternative methods that would work best for a particular child. What was effective with previous children may not work with this child

They are tempted to resent their child

Parents will also wonder what it means for them to keep no record of wrongs. Help them understand that Paul's point is not that they try to forget offenses, or act as if their child has never done wrong. That's impossible and unwise. His point is that love is not resentful. As Gordon Fee writes, "The life that is so touched by the never-ceasing love of God in Christ is in turn enabled by the Spirit to love others in the same way."³

How can they keep from becoming resentful or unhardened their hearts? By forgiving others as God in Christ forgave them ([Eph. 4:32](#)). Also encourage parents to remind themselves of the parable of the unforgiving servant ([Matt. 18:21–35](#)) and the fact that we love because Christ first loved us ([1 John 4:19](#))—despite our sin ([Eph. 2:4–5](#)).

Keep in mind that telling someone they should forgive doesn't mean we are excused from the obligation to weep with those who weep. If you encourage people to forgive without acknowledging the severity of their suffering, they may very well end up resenting you and your counsel. So don't rush them through their grief or minimize their suffering. You can encourage them to forgive while simultaneously comforting them during their distress.

They often have no hope

After a long season of dealing with a rebellious child's drug abuse, disrespect, or run-ins with the law, many parents have no hope that their child will change. But [1 Corinthians 13:7](#) tells us that love, empowered by a belief and hope in the promises of God, bears (puts up with) and endures all things.⁴ With this in mind, parents need to be challenged to consider whether their grief is the result of hoping in things that God never guaranteed (successful kids, obedient kids, peace in the home, etc.).

Some parents need to become more familiar with what the Bible says we should place our hope in (God's glory, [Rom. 5:2](#); the return of Christ, [Titus 2:13](#); the promises and teaching of Scripture, [1 Cor. 15:4](#); God's comfort, [2 Cor. 1:3–4](#); etc.).

Some parents may object by saying that such hope is otherworldly, pie-in-the-sky. You may need to remind them that one of the reasons they may be so disappointed is that they placed their hope in something that God has not promised. Remind them that God encourages us to place our hope in things that are certain so that we can have stability and peace in the midst of a sinful and disappointing world.

Building their hope upon the certain realities that God has promised allows parents to reframe their circumstances in light of God's story. Only then can they begin to see that there is a purpose in their suffering.

How not-to-win Pastor of the Year

You may be tempted to read [1 Corinthians 13:4–7](#) and tell the parents, “If you *really* loved your child, you’d be patient, kind, content, humble, etc.”

While I’m sure there’s a situation out there that requires that approach, most of the time that’s not a good move. Parents feel beat up enough that their child is out of control. They feel like people are wondering why they can’t get their kids under control (which they are). Plus they’re often aware of their failures as parents. As I mentioned earlier, many actually come to dislike their children. And they feel guilty about not loving their children enough. So no need to pile on.

What do they need to know?

They need to know that [1 Corinthians 13:4–7](#) describes the way Christ loves them despite their failures and their own rebellion. There are certainly ways to use this passage to challenge them to grow in their ability to demonstrate their love for their child. But there’s no need to use this passage to question their love for their child.

Other ways to use 1 Cor. 13

I’ve already given a few questions and suggestions you can use to help parents process and apply the truth of [1 Corinthians 13:4–7](#) to parenting. But there are many other ways you could use this passage:

- You could have the parents meditate on it.
- Have them memorize it.
- Create situation-specific questions about the passage for the parents you’re ministering to.

- Have the parents write out the ways in which they've benefited from God's love.
- Have the parents write out the ways they have benefited from others who have loved them in ways described in [1 Corinthians 13:4-7](#).

Parents of rebellious teens may have conflicting emotions toward their children! [First Corinthians 13](#) can help them see practical ways to continue loving their children when their relationship with them has been strained.