**RELATIONSHIPS WITH UNBELIEVING FAMILY MEMBERS**

“Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, *that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives,* *when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear”* (1Pt.3:1-2). This text speaks of a believing woman who is married to an unbelieving spouse. Such passages imply both the *reality* and the *difficulty* of interactions with unbelieving family members. We often struggle with such situations, especially at holiday time. In this article, we will note some principles that can guide us in these matters.

**First, interactions with unbelieving family members are *permitted*.** For example, being married to an unbeliever, though unwise, is permitted (1Cor.7:12-14; 1Pt.3:1-2). Even our children must learn to develop their own faith – with our help, of course (Ep.6:4; cp. Ezk.18:20). In the course of your life, you may receive social invitations from family members who do not believe (cp. 1Cor.10:27). In fact, these kinds of interactions may actually become evangelistic opportunities (cp. Lk.15:1-7). This principle is very important because there are a few “self-righteous” believers, who think they are “too good” to associate with unbelievers. By contrast, the Bible tells us that we should not be snobbish; instead, we should make the best use of such situations (Mt.5:16).

**Second, interactions with unbelieving family members are *limited*.** To make this point, we must begin with a basic Biblical principle: *It is NEVER right to participate in, support, or endorse sin* (2Jn.9-11). Consider my earlier example of one who received an invitation to dinner from an unbeliever (1Cor.10:27). In that very context, Paul implies some limitation: “If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake. *But if anyone says to you, ‘This was offered to idols,’ do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience’ sake… ‘Conscience,’ I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man’s conscience?*” (1Cor.10:27-29). In this situation, Paul allowed a believer to accept a social invitation from an unbeliever – until the unbeliever tries to “test” the believer by serving him meat sacrificed to idols. When that happens, a line must be drawn! These distinctions and decisions should be made with the intent of glorifying God in all situations (1Cor.10:31-33).

**Remember, you can only control *yourself;* you can’t control others!** This is a crucial truth, because many believe it is their job to control what others do. But the cold hard truth is, you can’t! This is especially true when you are invited to another’s home. When you are a guest in another’s house, *you are in their domain* (cf. Ep.5:23). If they commit sin, you have limited options: You can point it out and ask them to stop, or you can leave. This may make them mad at you (Ga.4:16); but so be it! If this is a couple that are “living together” without being married, do NOT condone their lifestyle by staying overnight; get a hotel, instead. But regardless of the lines you draw, know that you cannot force them to comply with God’s will; you can only “persuade” (cf. 2Cor.5:11).

**However, if they come to your house, *they are now in your domain!*** In this situation, the proverbial “shoe is on the other foot.” When they enter YOUR domain, you cannot allow blatant sin in your own home! It is entirely appropriate to say, “There will be no drinking in my home,” or “There will be no sleeping with your boyfriend in my home.” And, if they refuse to comply, you can say, “Then you are not welcome here; please leave.” I realize that saying such things is difficult; but this is what it means to love God more than family (Mt.10:34-37).

These are just a few “guidelines” for dealing with difficult family interactions. Admittedly, they are much easier to talk about than to apply. But we must try to apply them as best we can, in order to honor the God that we serve. Being a Christian means *always* taking a stand for what’s right – even if it pits us against family (Mt.10:37).

--Lanny Smith