

Message: Listen to Jesus

I met a pastor when I was in seminary. That’s not really surprising. This pastor was different. His name was John Singletary. That’s what his church business card said, “John Singletary.” There was no “Rev.,” “Pastor”, “Elder” or any other indication of his role. I asked John why he didn’t use a title. His answer: “People know I’m a pastor by the way I act.” I have to tell you – John walked the talk. Everyone knew he was a pastor without him saying so. He took his inspiration from Jesus in a way that has always stayed with me.

Jesus lived that way. Our scripture reading, John 10:22-30, is a good example. One winter day during Hanukkah, Jesus was walking around in the outer court of the temple in Jerusalem. He was surrounded by a group of Pharisees. They were giving Jesus a hard time.

Someone in the crowd boldly asked, *“How long are you going to keep us guessing? If you’re the Messiah, tell us straight out”* (v24, MSG). They feel like Jesus is intentionally keeping things from them. They want him to speak openly and freely to them.

They didn’t get it. Jesus didn’t need a business card. He replied, *“I told you, but you don’t believe. Everything I have done has been authorized by my Father, actions that speak louder than words. You don’t believe because you’re not my sheep.”* (vv25-26, MSG).

That seems harsh, doesn’t it? When we hear or read the passage on it’s own it sounds like Jesus is rejecting them ... *“you’re not my sheep,”* when what he’s really saying is they don’t have confidence in Jesus. They don’t believe what he’s saying is true. They’d prefer to listen to those who would deceive them or destroy their lives.

This passage makes a good case for reading the Bible in context. We need to look at what happened before and after the interaction between Jesus and those circled around him to make sense of things.

Jesus is telling us something important, but it’s easy to overlook if we’re distracted. Let’s take a look at what was going on before Jesus was challenged in the temple. To do so, you have to turn back to John 8. That’s where we find out who Jesus is talking to, where it begins.

Verses 1-2 tell us Jesus was staying on the Mount of Olives. He went to the temple in the morning – that seems to have been his daily routine. Jesus sat with some people and began teaching them. That’s when the legal experts and Pharisees came and interrupted him.

This begins a series of conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees, recorded in John 8-10. There are many in the crowd who believe in Jesus, but there’s a group who doesn’t. They just don’t get it. After a while, it appears that mostly Pharisees are left – others believers don’t want to be around this group!

The Pharisees are giving Jesus a hard time. After listening to Jesus, they say, “*We were right all along when we called you a Samaritan and said you’re crazy - demon-possessed!*” (John 8:48, MSG). They’re saying “we’re right and you can’t blame us.” After all, Jesus is from the wrong side of the tracks and they think he’s nuts to buck the system. They’re trying to justify their rudeness and wrong thinking.

Jesus isn’t worried. He says, “*I’m not crazy. I simply honor my Father, while you dishonor me. I’m not trying to get anything for myself. God intends something gloriously grand here and is making the decisions that will bring it about*” (vv49-50, MSG). That conversation goes back and forth for several days, leading up to John 10 and the interaction between Jesus and those who are on the porch with him.

We have a number of parents – Moms, in the room today.

Let me ask you a question: have you ever tried to teach your children a lesson, but they just seem to ignore you, over and over again? Of course. Sometimes children just don’t want to listen. They’re stubborn. They don’t pay attention to what we’re saying or doing, even when the evidence is right in front of them. Repeating yourself doesn’t seem to help. Children offer excuses, ignoring what those who are more mature know to be a healthier way to live.

That’s the way we are with God. We’re stubborn spiritual children, who don’t want to pay attention to the evidence right in front of us. We prefer to justify our intentionally wrong actions and wrong thinking instead. And, to make things worse, that’s what we teach our children

by example. That’s “do what I say, don’t do what I do” coming back to haunt us.

Thankfully, Jesus doesn’t give up on us! Jesus always tries to reach out to those who have closed minds and hard hearts. In the case of the Pharisees, Jesus tries to tell them what they want to know – over and over!

Jesus starts out with a story, *“Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he’s up to no good - a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they’re familiar with his voice. They won’t follow a stranger’s voice but will scatter because they aren’t used to the sound of it”* (John 10:1-6, MSG).

Jesus told this simple story to show them who he was, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. *“I’ll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep”* (v7). That didn’t work, either.

Jesus tried again, *“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me”* (v14). They still don’t get it!

John tells us, *“This ... [conversation] caused another split in the Jewish ranks. A lot of them were saying, ‘He’s crazy, a maniac - out of his head completely. Why bother listening to him?’ But others weren’t so sure: ‘These aren’t the words of a crazy man. Can a maniac [heal people]?’”* Some of the Pharisees got it, while others just saw Jesus as delusional.

That leads us to the question on the porch: Who are you?

If you’ll permit, I’ll paraphrase Jesus’ reply, *“I told you! You aren’t listening. You don’t trust me, so you don’t have the confidence to have faith in who I am. You aren’t willing to follow me on the new way. You’re invited and can do so because I love you. And I’ll care for you, keeping you safe and sound. God makes this possible and gives you to my safekeeping because God and I are one”* (vv25-30, my paraphrase).

That’s clear. Plain as day. We don’t speak the same way, but we’re intelligent people. We get it. Jesus says he’s the Son of God. He’s the Good Shepherd, who will care for us. He loves us, more than anyone else. All we have to do is listen to his voice, believe and follow him.

Yet many people have the same reaction as the Pharisees. They pick up stones to kill him. Jesus isn’t what they expect. He isn’t royal, priestly, educated or from the right side of the tracks. Jesus isn’t what they want. They reject him, despite the evidence and the good he does. They prefer numbness and spiritual death to life. So Jesus left the temple and went to the river. Those who believed came to be with him.

The same is true today. Jesus isn’t what many people expect. They’re turned off by some people who go to church who are like the Pharisees. We often act in ways that are un-graceful. We’re seen as strict, rigid and judgmental, rather than loving, caring and hospitable. For many of our neighbors and family members, there’s little evidence that faith has changed our lives. We’re caught in the “do as I say, not as I do” trap.

Yet there is this evidence. Those who believe, or who are open, are willing to come and be with others who are following Jesus. That happens not just on Sunday mornings, but at other times, places and with different groups of people. We know we’re broken and imperfect. We know we need a shepherd to guide us and care for us.

We’re made better when we do so. We’re made better when we gather with others. This helps us stretch and grow. We learn how other people hear Jesus’ voice and see evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in ways we didn’t imagine. We begin to mature spiritually, eventually learning how to become spiritual parents to others. When we gather to care for others, amazing things happen. Lives are changed.

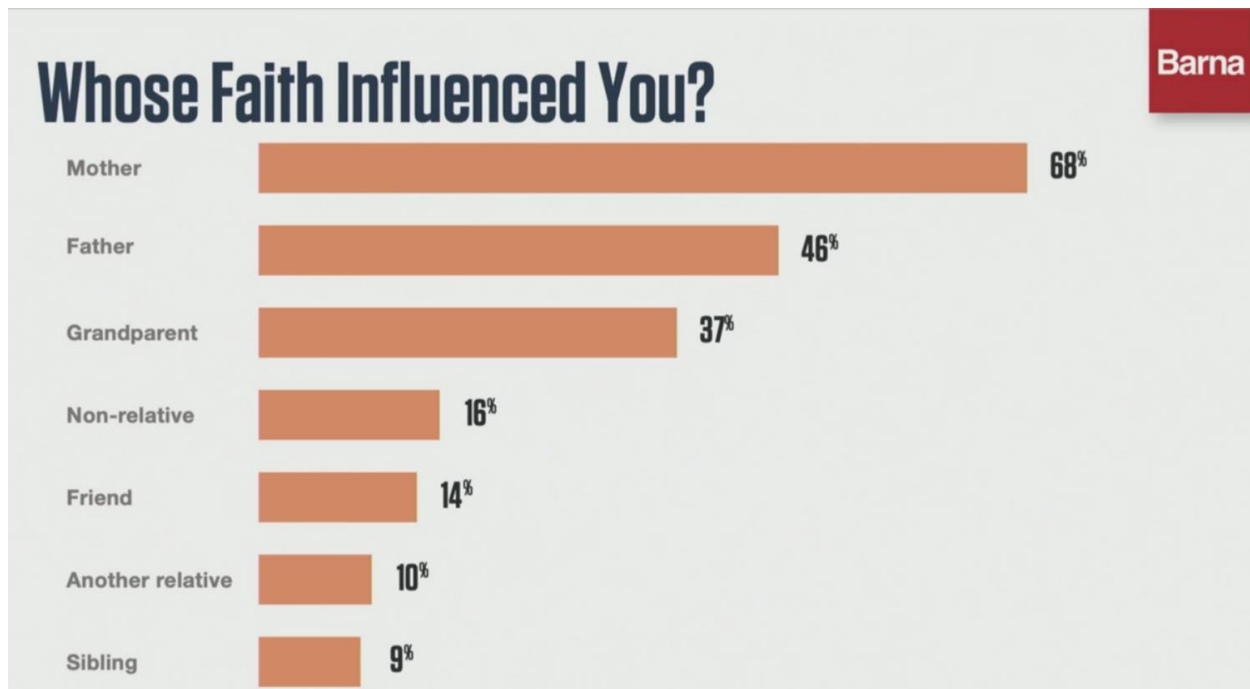
Parents have a large part to play in our spiritual life. I want to encourage all Moms and Dads, grandmothers and grandfathers. You do an amazing job balancing life, work and raising one or more children. I give thanks to God for the opportunity you have to shape a young life.

To help you on the journey, Susan Park, our Family Ministry coordinator, is organizing classes on spiritually vibrant households.

I invite you to talk with her about your interest, particularly if you’re willing to host. These classes are based on research by the Barna group. I invite you to join or start a group where you can have spiritual conversations about Jesus together. You’ll be glad you did.

One of the key findings is who influences the faith of children.

I’m sure it comes as no surprise to learn that mothers have the greatest influence on our faith. Dads, grandparents, brothers and sisters all have a part as well, but the bond between Moms and children is special.



How do Moms, Dads and grandparents help their children grow in faith? They act as spiritual coaches or guides. The 500 teenagers who participated in the survey said you do so in several ways:

- Setting an example
- Encouraging me to go to church
- Talks about God’s forgiveness
- Teaches me about traditions of faith
- Teaches me about the Bible¹

I’m not trying to make anyone feel guilty. If you aren’t having spiritual conversations at home or at least having fun, we want to help

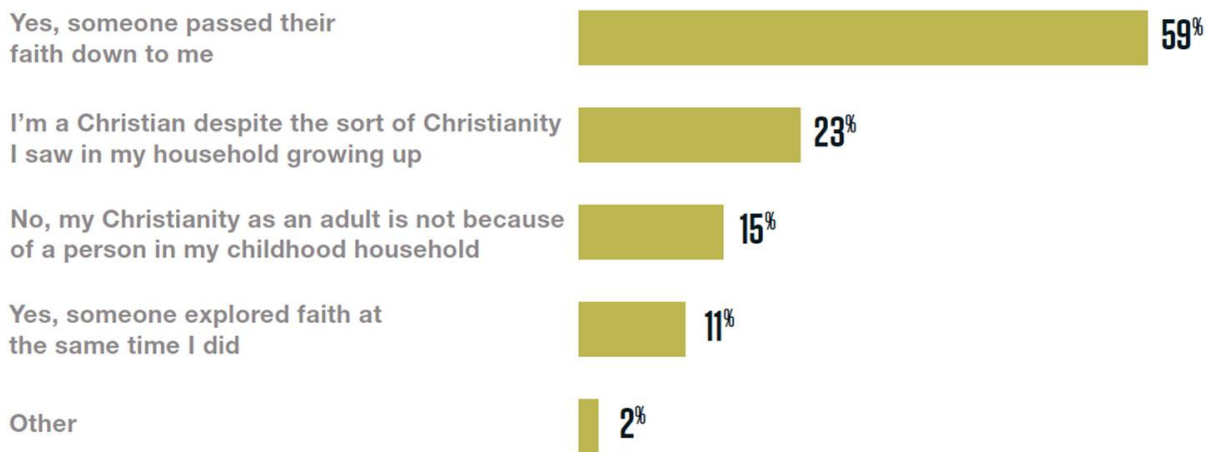
¹ *Households of Faith*, 2018, p. 125

and encourage you to start. One other, important piece of information Barna gives us helps.

When asked the question, “Would you say you’re a Christian as an adult because of a person you grew up with in your household?” 2,400 people (500 teens) responded in this way.²

Faith Experiences with Families of Origin

Would you say you are a Christian as an adult because of a person you grew up with in your household? Check all that apply.



Moms are important. So are Dads, grandparents and others. Even when we fail or set a bad example, children can hear Jesus’ call. So take a deep breath. Relax. Spend time with your family, rest and tell them you love them. Those who wrestle with their faith while growing up seem to have a stronger and deeper understanding of the nature and presence of God in every day life.

I’m grateful for all of the parents, grandparents and extended family members gathered here today. My prayer is for you to listen to the voice of love. Hear Jesus’ voice and follow him. When you do so, freely and willingly, you’ll find the impact isn’t just on your life. The lives of the children and family members in your life will be impacted in a positive way as well.

Listen closely: Jesus is calling. How will you respond?

² Barna webinar, March 2018

Let us pray ...

O God, thank you for the blessings of mothers; those who carried us and those who care for us. We are grateful for the gift of life. Forgive us when we act like stubborn children, unwilling to listen to you when you are speaking to us in love. Help us when we have false expectations of what and who you are. Break down the barriers we have put up so that love can flow in, bringing light and hope into our life and the lives of those close to us. Thank you for never giving up on us and caring for us even when we turn away. May we be evidence to others of your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Psalm 23 (CEB)

The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing. He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff - they protect me.

You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over! Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the LORD's house as long as I live.

John 10:22-30 (CEB)

The time came for the Festival of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple, walking in the covered porch named for Solomon. The Jewish opposition circled around him and asked, “How long will you test our patience? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “I have told you, but you don't believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you don't believe because you don't belong to my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life. They will never die, and no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them from my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.”