

# Intruding Family Members

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January 5, 2018



**Q: There is a family member who keeps intruding in my life. I want to love them well, and I don't want to go against God's teaching about the duty we owe to family, but their constant interruptions and negative attitude are really affecting me and my family. What can I do?**

A: This is an incredibly important question. Both for those who need a reminder that we have an obligation to the people around us (especially to those whom we are related), and those who need to remember that our families do not have an absolute claim on our time, energy, or resources.

We have experienced an unprecedented fracturing of the family in our society and in our age. This is the cause of many of our problems. If you experience great loneliness or overwhelming detachment from the people around you, from your home, or from your place in this world, it is likely a partial result of the breaking apart of the family. For the first time in history, we exist in a society that has reduced human life to the individual. While this

movement has a grain of truth and goodness to it (the human person truly does have great intrinsic dignity and goodness), it has also resulted in exalting the individual to an absolute level.

We need to return to the full biblical truth regarding our responsibility to our own families.

This includes the relationship that we have with our extended family members and our adult children, siblings, and parents. God is very clear (in the Bible and through the Church) about the responsibilities children have to their parents. In his Letter to the Colossians, Saint Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents in everything” (Colossians 3:20). This is a command from the Lord.

As children grow and gain more independence from their parents, this command changes in practice, but not in essence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies, “As they grow up, children should continue to respect their parents. They should anticipate their wishes, willingly seek their advice, and accept their just admonitions. Obedience toward parents ceases with the emancipation of the children; not so respect, which is always owed to them” (CCC 2217).

Further, once parents reach the place where they need the assistance of their grown children, they are owed a certain level of care. The Catechism states, “As much as they can, they must give them material and moral support in old age and in times of illness, loneliness, or distress” (CCC 2218). It further reminds us of Christ’s condemnation of those who would forsake the care owed to parents for the sake of an imagined “offering to God” in Matthew 15 and Mark 7.

All of this remind us of God’s commands to be involved, to the degree that we are able, in the lives of family members. Please note, however, that the exact manner of this care is not specified. There are times when a grown child cannot care for the exact needs of their siblings or parents. There are times when someone in need will require the help of those outside of the immediate family. There are times when professional care is required.

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And there are times when one will have to set boundaries on the level of involvement one’s family has in their life. Jesus makes it clear that we are called to love him above father or mother, spouse, sibling and child (cf. Mt. 10:37, Lk. 9:59). The Catechism states it in this way: “Family ties are important but not absolute. Just as the child grows to maturity and human and spiritual autonomy, so his unique vocation which comes from God asserts itself more clearly and forcefully. Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it. They must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to follow Jesus” (CCC 2232).

Therefore, we are left with the need for love and wisdom. We are commanded to love those people to whom we are related. And yet, we also need to be wise in the manner of that love. This “wise love” will necessarily involve creating boundaries. We don’t often think of boundaries when it comes to love, but they are essential.

Consider the following two examples. **Imagine that a man’s mother is an addict.** He consistently offers to be a part of her life, but she consistently avoids him...until she needs money for rent. One evening, she calls him and tells him that she needs a few thousand dollars for rent. If she can’t pay, she may be homeless. Now, her son has no obligation to enable his mother’s destructive behavior. He could, weighing out the options and the need for his mom to reach a point where she reaches “rock bottom”, allow her to fall. This would not be done recklessly or without due consideration. It would also not be a final rejection of his mom; it would be temporarily withholding help so as to help her when she is ready to change. He could draw a boundary.

**Another example could be a family member who is consistently negative.** It might be very wise and loving to let them know that you will not tolerate a certain way of acting or speaking. You can politely and kindly draw a boundary around what you will accept and what you will not accept. I have found that we typically continue the kinds of behaviors that others allow us to get away with (whether that is being late, gossiping, swearing, excessive complaining, etc...). The same is true for others: they usually continue the behaviors we allow them to get away with.

Keep this in mind, however. Once you draw a boundary, they may get upset with you.

That’s fine. If someone had become used to poisoning your drinking water and you responded by placing a seal around your water so that they could no longer poison it...and they became angry with you for that...you wouldn’t remove the seal so they could keep on poisoning you. The same is true for poisonous behavior. If you place a boundary around yourself that keeps out the behavior, they may become upset that you are not allowing them to poison your mood. That is no reason to allow the poisonous words and behavior to continue.