

When God Says “Go!” and Parents Say “No!” A Korean-American Girl’s Testimony

By Joan C. and Eddie Gibbs

It was obvious. My parents were disappointed to say the least, perhaps downright angry. I thought they might be somewhat upset, but I was hardly prepared for the intensity of their reaction. As my mom became verbally hostile and my dad withdrew from me, I was left unsure of what to do. It wasn’t as if my interest in missions suddenly came out of nowhere. Just a few months earlier they gladly allowed me to go on a short-term missions trip to India. But, now, the idea of me getting involved in missions as a career suddenly drove a deep wedge between us. It is an understatement to say that the months to follow were extremely difficult.

That was years ago. Today I am involved in missions full-time, and my parents are behind me one hundred percent. During those past three years I have made a lot of mistakes in the way I dealt with my parents. But by god’s grace the wedge between us has been removed and replaced with a level of support and affirmation that I never thought possible. Through mistakes, prayer, patience, and the wise counsel of others, I have learned a thing or two about what to do.

1. Try to understand their perspective.

In the Korean-American culture, like many others, many parents who call themselves Christians seem to place more value on education, money, prestige, and family rather than living by kingdom values. The reason for this is not so much that they aren’t spiritual or committed enough as much as it is more a result of their background. Most of Korean-American parents were raised in a war generation and consequently remember experience of oppression, humility, and poverty. Painful memories of suffering are still very real to them, and it is only natural for them to want their children to have materially comfortable lives. Parents, often with their dreams unfulfilled, place great pressure on their children to achieve what they could not.

Realize that many parents have never been exposed to missions. As a result, they may not fully grasp God’s purpose of giving the Good News to peoples of all cultures. Looking through your parents’ perspective, you should find yourself much more sensitive to their reservations and concerns. The tension you feel is not peculiar to missions. Missions can be the occasion rather than the cause of parent/child conflict. One of the things that conflicts reveal is needs. It is easy to simply see your parents as an unnecessary obstacle to your career in missions. They’re not! Instead, turn this struggle into an opportunity to minister to the needs of your parents. This can be the best time to let them know how much you appreciate the hard work they have done for you, to make them feel secure in your love and respect for them, and to share with each other what God means to you.

2. Realize that your going overseas will mean considerable sacrifice on the part of your parents.

While you are thinking about making great sacrifices because of your radical commitment to Christ and your desire to save the lost, your parents may be concerned about some practical matters that will impact them. They are concerned about your safety and your future, but also concerned about their own safety and security. As they grow older, they

want to be surrounded by familiar faces and retire into comfort with family and grandchildren around. It is understandable for them to feel deprived at the thought of not having their family nearby.

One veteran missionary couple confessed that they were a little grieved when their daughter told them of her own missionary plans, even though they themselves were missionaries! Of course they were thrilled about their daughter's decision and gave her their blessing and full support, but they knew that it would mean tremendous sacrifices for them as well. Parents pay a great cost when you go overseas. In fact, they may pay more of the cost of missionary service than their children. You get the adventure and get to go to new places. But your parents are left behind with your photograph over the fireplace. God may assess their contribution as greater than yours.

Parents may also worry about what will happen to them if they need their children nearby. As they get older and frail, they want to know whether their children will care for them. This is particularly important in Korean culture since the primary responsibility of taking care of the elderly falls on the children.

3. Realize that your parents may face subtle ridicule or even be looked down upon by others.

It is not unheard of for parents to be asked by their friends why their son or daughter is throwing away their education and a lucrative career. Your parents may even begin to wonder why their children can't be more like everyone else. If you haven't taken the time to clearly explain to them what you will be doing and the importance of it, you may be inviting their criticism of your plans as they try to come to grips with some of these questions.

4. Demonstrate to your parents that you honor and respect them.

Scripture clearly commands us to honor and obey our parents, and this value is woven deeply into every aspect of Korean culture. We all know that it is important, but just how do we flesh this out when it comes to making decisions about a career in missions?

5. Include them in your decision-making process.

Don't just tell them your plans, as if you have already made a decision without their input. They will receive that as a sign of disrespect. Let them in and be a part of your life, especially when making important decisions. Parents want to be involved in their children's lives, even if they don't show it. My parents didn't seem very interested in my life, but once I asked them to help me think through and make this important decision about a missionary career, their resentment slowly dissipated and they softened up.

6. If your parents are Christians, ask them to pray with you for several months about your plans.

Ask them, "Can we both seek the guidance of God during the next six months? If it is right for me, I trust that God will show that to you. If that's not so, then one of us is wrong, and it may be me." They will gain respect for you and will listen to what you have to say if they see this kind of humility in you.

7. Ask them why they feel as they do and carefully listen to their response.

They may be right! As your parents, they might know you better than you know yourself. Let them know you really want to know why they are so strongly opposed and then diligently and humbly evaluate their answers. They might help you to understand ways you can be better prepared on issues that might need to be addressed before leaving to go overseas.

8. Let them know you haven't just dismissed their objections.

This is a classic way to communicate disrespect. Fortunately I responded, "You're right, Dad. I realize that if I follow what I believe to be God's call to the missions field, it means I won't have the status and financial security that I might attain if I stayed here. I've really struggled with that, but I've come to the conclusion that there are more important values and issues in my life."

9. Affirm your deep love and concern for your parents.

Tell them that you love them, need them, respect and honor them, and that you truly need and desire the support they have given you in the past. They need to feel secure in their relationship with you and know that you will not dismiss them. They need to know that it would be a cost to you as well as to them for you to leave. Use this seemingly difficult situation as an opportunity to express your appreciation for them. Once you do leave, go out of your way to communicate with them frequently. Let them know what your daily activities are. Every time I was away from home, I made an extra effort to call or write my parents and express my love and appreciation for them. This action really meant a lot to my parents and to our relationship.

10. Let them know you will take care of them as they grow older.

It is good to have already discussed with your siblings the plans for taking care of your parents as they grow older. Make it clear that you are not abandoning your parents but that you wholeheartedly believe the Bible's admonition that "If anyone does not provide for his relatives ... he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8).

11. Seek counsel from an older mature Christian who knows you and your family.

It is possible that one day you may have to decide to go overseas despite your parents' opposition. Before doing anything that drastic, first find an older Christian who can tell you whether you are too impetuous and need to wait for a little while. A year may seem like the end of the world to you, but sometimes one year can make all the difference in the world.

12. Reflect on the way you have represented your "great" ideas before.

You have sounded certain about so many other things in which you are no longer very interested. They have seen you date different people and change your major a dozen times, each time claiming that you were sure this was God's will. How are your parents to know this plan to go overseas is not just another of your many enthusiasms.

13. Intelligently inform your parents about your mission.

Many parents, especially those who haven't traveled much, picture their children in the midst of a jungle somewhere with wild animals roaring at them, snakes hissing at their feet, and spiders crawling up their legs. The more informed they are, the better they will understand and will be at ease about your decision. If there is a real danger, then of course

they won't feel at ease nor will they feel more secure. They will, however, have to trust God that you will be in His hands.

14. Tell them about the people among whom you will work, the region of the world, and what it is like there.

Inform them about your safety, travel plans, how to communicate, etc. Introduce them to the leadership in your agency, either in person or by phone. My parents felt better when they had a chance to meet some of the leaders from my agency. They realized that the leaders were mature and competent people who could be trusted. It may also be helpful to have the parents of other Korean-American missionaries visit with your parents in order to answer your parents' questions and hopefully alleviate some of their concerns.

15. Help them to not only focus on the sacrifices of missions but to also see the benefits of missions work.

Many missionaries are dealing with more urgent and fundamental questions than what we meet here in the United States. For instance, some missionaries are saving whole populations from starvation, helping to develop agriculture, teaching farm management, developing literacy programs, and giving medical aid to war torn victims. In some places the gospel has given people the power to forgive their enemies and has brought peace between tribes and ethnic groups that have been at war for centuries.

16. Help your parents see that raising support is not begging.

North Americans so value financial independence that the idea of their children asking others for financial support is unthinkable and often equate it with begging. It is important to explain that begging results from an unwillingness or inability to work. But, as a missionary, you will probably be working harder than ever. Often the reason you need to raise support instead of being paid a salary is because the people you are serving usually don't have the resources to pay for your work. Furthermore, raising support is biblical and provides an accountability structure with your supporters.

17. Help your parents see that your education will not be wasted.

Explain how your college degree will give you considerable credibility with people. Explain that the discipline, relational and organizational skills that you developed in college will be tremendous assets on the field. Also outline specific ways that some of your college courses have prepared you to be more effective.

18. If you are going on a short-term missions trip, help your parents see the value of such a trip.

Help them view it in a realistic time frame—a summer missions trip is only six to eight weeks! Also, help them see how a broad exposure will help you as you grow in your understanding of what you really want to do in life and in understanding people better. Again, it is important to let them know that you value your education and that your intention is not to throw it away. Explain how such exposure trips can enrich your college education and outlook on life. As you communicate this, it is very important that you back up your words by doing well in your classes thereby showing that you do indeed value your education.

While I found these suggestions helpful, they won't guarantee that your parents will support your decision about missions. Continually bathe the whole process in prayer and believe that God can help you and your parents to see eye to eye. Know that parents want what is best for their children. Ultimately, they want their children to be happy. Working through this kind of conflict can be difficult, but it is worth it in order for you to deepen your relationship with your parents and for your entry into an exciting ministry God may have for you!

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