



[Home](#) [About](#) [Apply](#) [Resources](#)

Issue 57 — You Can Affirm Without Agreeing

Messy Story of the Week

When sixteen-year-old Claire received a disappointing grade on her history paper, she dropped her backpack beside the kitchen table and announced, "Mrs. Bennett hates me."

Her father, Marcus, had watched Claire finish the paper late the night before it was due. He knew she had rushed through the final pages and had not followed all the instructions.

"Your teacher doesn't hate you," he said. "You waited until the last minute, and now you don't like the consequences."

Claire grabbed her backpack and headed toward her room.

"Forget it," she said. "You always take everyone else's side."

Marcus believed he had told the truth. The grade probably had more to do with Claire's rushed work than with her teacher's personal opinion.

But Claire had not yet been ready to examine the quality of her paper. She was still trying to express what the grade meant to her: *My effort*

wasn't seen. My teacher has already decided what kind of student I am. Nothing I do will change her opinion.

Later, Marcus knocked on her door.

"I don't know whether Mrs. Bennett dislikes you," he said. "But it sounds like the grade confirmed something you were already worried about—that she doesn't see how hard you are trying."

Claire looked up.

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly it."

Marcus had not agreed that the teacher hated her. He had not said the grade was unfair or excused Claire's choices. He had simply acknowledged the experience beneath her conclusion.

Once Claire knew her father understood what she was wrestling with, they could look at the teacher's comments and talk honestly about what she might do differently next time.

Faithful God Then and Now

**"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." —
Romans 12:15**

When Jesus arrived in Bethany after Lazarus died, He knew something Mary and Martha did not know: Lazarus would soon walk out of the tomb.

Jesus could have corrected their despair immediately. He could have told them that their grief was unnecessary because He already knew how the story would end.

Instead, Jesus entered their sorrow.

When Mary wept, Jesus wept with her.

He did not agree that death would have the final word. He did not surrender the truth of what He was about to do. But knowing the larger truth did not prevent Him from responding compassionately to her present pain.

We sometimes believe that acknowledging someone's experience means endorsing every thought, accusation, or conclusion attached to it.

It does not.

We can recognize that someone is disappointed without agreeing that another person has treated them unfairly. We can understand why our spouse interpreted a conversation a certain way while still remembering it differently. We can acknowledge a child's anger without approving of disrespectful behavior.

Affirmation says, "Your experience matters, and I want to understand it."

Agreement says, "Your interpretation is completely accurate."

Those are not the same thing.

What We Can Learn

- **Feelings and conclusions are not interchangeable.** "I felt hurt" describes an emotional experience. "You intended to hurt me" is a conclusion about another person's motive. We can acknowledge the hurt without confirming the assumed intention.
- **Understanding someone's perspective does not require abandoning our own.** Two people can remember or interpret the same event differently. Listening to one perspective does not erase the other.
- **Affirmation makes honest conversation more possible.** When people know their experience has been heard, they are often better able to examine assumptions, accept responsibility, and consider another point of view.
- **Compassion and accountability can coexist.** Marcus could recognize Claire's discouragement and still help her take responsibility for rushing through the assignment.
- **We do not need to settle every disputed detail immediately.** Sometimes the first faithful step is simply identifying what the

event meant to the other person.

Behind the Curtain

In coaching, I often see conversations become stuck because both people are arguing over whose interpretation is correct.

One person says, "I felt ignored."

The other responds, "I wasn't ignoring you."

Both statements may be true.

One person experienced the conversation as being ignored. The other person did not intend to ignore them. The problem grows when each person believes acknowledging the other's experience will require surrendering their own.

Affirmation can sound like:

- "I can understand why you interpreted it that way."
- "It sounds like you expected me to respond differently."
- "I can see that this mattered deeply to you."
- "You were hoping I would notice without being asked."
- "I understand that you remember it differently."
- "I may see parts of this differently, but I want to understand your perspective."

Affirmation is not a technique for making someone calm down. It is an honest effort to identify what the other person experienced and why it matters to them.

It also does not require us to affirm something harmful or untrue. We can say:

"I understand that you were angry. Speaking to me that way is still not acceptable."

"I can see why you were disappointed. We still need to follow through on what we agreed."

"I understand that you remember it differently. I am not willing to accept responsibility for an intention I did not have."

Healthy affirmation makes room for both compassion and clarity.

Faithful Family Tools

Would you like help understanding the patterns beneath your family's disagreements?

The free course, **What's Happening in Your Relationships?**, will help you recognize what may be driving repeated reactions and identify a faithful next step:

[Access the free course](#)

Want a safe place to practice clearer, more compassionate family relationships?

Join the Faithful Families Facebook community for practical teaching, reflection, and encouragement rooted in Scripture:

[Join us on Facebook](#)

Faith Step for the Week

Bible Passage

Read John 11:17–35.

Notice how Jesus responds to Martha and Mary. He knows the truth, but He does not use that knowledge to dismiss their grief. Pay attention to the way truth, presence, and compassion remain together.

Two-Minute Practice

Think of a recent disagreement in which you wanted to correct someone's interpretation.

For two minutes, set aside the question of who was right and ask:

1. What did this person believe was happening?
2. What emotion followed from that interpretation?
3. What part of the experience can I honestly acknowledge?

Practice one response:

"I may understand parts of this differently, but I can see that you were _____ because you believed _____."

Do not add "but" and immediately begin defending yourself. Let the affirmation stand long enough for the other person to tell you whether you understood.

Prayer

Faithful God, You meet me with both truth and compassion. Teach me to do the same for the people I love. Help me listen carefully enough to recognize what they are experiencing without pretending that every interpretation is accurate. Give me courage to remain honest, humility to consider what I may have missed, and wisdom to hold compassion and accountability together. Amen.

Coming Next

Next week, we will bring these skills together and explore questions that can change the direction of conflict. Instead of arguing over positions or trying to win, we will learn to ask questions that uncover concerns, clarify what matters, and help a family move toward the problem together.

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