

Family Understanding

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H. Ec. Jr.

THE final bars of "Rock of Ages" echoed into the empty balcony of Trinity Church. Papers rustled, hymnbooks scratched as they slid into the racks, throats cleared, and eyes turned front. The auditorium became quiet. Father closed the hymnal and settled himself for the sermon. The family occupied their usual front pew, the one in front of Doc Sharp and his wife. Johnny, the youngest, sat between his father and his older sister, sixteen-year-old Sally. Father picked the same pew every Sunday. Only once or twice each year did Mother ever succeed in leading Father into a pew farther back, and then only when he was off guard like at Christmas or Easter. Mother hated to be so conspicuous in a front row every Sunday, but Father would explain to her that the sermons were always better if you sat near the pulpit. So the family sat in a front pew.

Reverend Mr. Lister, camouflaged in a long black robe, rose from his seat and walked over to the pulpit. He clasped one lean hand over the edge of the open Bible. His voice rasped over the hushed congregation.

"I have chosen for the scripture this morning a familiar passage in St. Matthew, chapter eighteen, verse three."

Father picked up the tattered leather Bible, hidden under the pile of Sunday School papers beside him. He wet his thumb and rapidly leafed through the pages to the Psalms. . . He stopped to adjust his glasses . . . then noisily turned through the Bible. His finger paused on the exact verse at the bottom of the page.

Johnny looked to the end of the pew. Mother's hands gripped the stout handle on her serviceable black purse. Her ankles tightly crossed themselves against the bottom of the pew and her lips set rigidly into a straight line. Her dreading eyes darted anxiously over the minister's face. Sally suddenly drew out a Sunday School paper from the bookrack and slouched down till just her hair bow peeked over the top of the pew.

Johnny squirmed. He knew what was coming. This had all happened before but he'd never given it a second thought till now. Nobody else in church ever was like Father—why did Dad have to be so different from everyone else? The other guys didn't have fathers who acted like that.

Father expectantly leaned forward, his face lighted up . . . and he loudly whispered the words of the scripture along with the minister.

“Verily, I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Reverend Mr. Lister looked down at Father. Heads turned anxiously to the Meyers' pew. A blanket hung over the congregation.

Johnny's eyes ran to Mother's set face and over Sally's pretended interest in the Sunday School paper. He jerked his head around to his father. His eyes following up along Father's arm. . . . Father's eyes were closed and his lips moved rapidly. It was coming. The word *converted* did it every time. Johnny bent his head and looked at the scuffs around the toes of his new high top boots.

Mother and Sally braced themselves. Mrs. Sharp in the pew behind the Meyers family, twitched her bulbous nose. A grin played hide-and-go-seek around the corners of Doc Sharp's mouth. They waited. Sure enough!

Father stood up, laid his head back and slowly rolled out, “Amen, Brother Lister, A . . . men, and Hal . . . le . . . lu . . . jah!”

A snicker echoed to the front from one of the rows under the balcony. Johnny's hands doubled into hard knots. His head ducked. Suddenly, he couldn't stand it any more. He jerked forward and yanked at the coat tail of Father's Sunday suit. Father abruptly sat down.

An angry flush spread over Father's face. The muscles in his neck raced back and forth. His hand grasped Johnny's knee in a steeled grip.

Muttering, he slowly turned to Johnny. “Young man, if we were home right now, I'd lick you within an inch of your life. Understand? Now you sit up there like a man and never let me catch you doing a thing like that again.”

Johnny gulped and breathlessly said, “Yes, sir.”

The tears welled up in his throat but he concentrated hard on

the ferns sitting on the platform around the pulpit. Sally pushed her Sunday School paper into the rack. Then she carefully reached over, so Father wouldn't notice, and gave Johnny's tightly clenched fist a sympathetic pat. In her place at the end of the pew Mother sighed hopelessly.



It was one o'clock, and from the kitchen for the third time came mother's call, "Dinner's ready, everybody!" Johnny, who was sprawled like a starfish on the floor of the living room slowly detached himself from Buck Rogers in the *Tribune's* Sunday comic section. At that last possible moment, Johnny ambled to the dining room and slipped noiselessly into his place across from Sally. He bowed his head and folded his hands on the spotless linen cloth.

Mother was slightly flushed from rushing to get dinner ready because church had let out so late. She sat stiffly on the chair nearest the kitchen, so that she could jump up and get anything she'd forgotten to put on the table . . . it was usually the paprika that Father might want on his baked potato, or the horse radish that no one else liked.

From the head of the table rumbled Father's deep voice. "Are we quite ready now . . . Johnny?"

Johnny felt Father's disapproving eyes run over his carefully watered and combed head.

"Yes, sir," came the mumbled answer.

Deliberately Father straightened his plain black tie, patted a napkin into place on his generous stomach, and glanced sharply at Mother. He caught her nod, the signal that the children were in a proper and receptive mood for grace.

Father cleared his throat twice, coughed and began slowly, "Heavenly Father . . . we, your humble and obedient servants . . . come to you this blessed Sabbath day, begging forgiveness for our many sins. Especially do we ask it for one member of our family, who, because of his youth, misunderstood our worship for thee. We thank you for this food and for the hands that prepared it. In thy name, we ask this . . . Amen."

Mother shot Father a glance that said, "Was that quite necessary, Paul? Johnny is getting so sensitive about such things, lately." She settled back in her chair waiting while Father dished up her plate. For as long as she could remember, he'd served

hers first, even when the children were small. The thick rug was soft under her feet. The odor of steaming food sent a satisfying hug around the spotless dining room. The wind quietly sucked the curtains against the screen. Dead silence hung over the table.

"Please, just a small potato, Father," she spoke quietly.

Automatically, Johnny took Mother's plate from Father. His arm swung the plate around to her waiting hand. He gulped. "Hey, Dad," he said, "why do you always have to go and say 'Amen' and that stuff out loud in church? Nobody else ever does that."

Mother's fork paused in mid-air. The bite of salad fell to her plate. A frown wrinkled across her forehead. Sally's startled eyes shot across to Johnny's face. A wondering "hu . . . uh" flew from her lips. Why did Johnny have to bring that up now?

Father paused in carving the roast, and he carefully laid the knife and fork on the edge of the platter. His square hand brushed over the sparsely settled hair. Thoughtfully he lifted his head. "Well, Son," he said, "that's rather an easy question for me to answer, now that you ask it. As you get older, you'll understand it a lot more. That's the way some people praise God and show their . . ."

"Johnny," Mother interrupted, "how many boys were there in your class this morning? I had eleven junior girls, today!"

"Now, Mother, just let me talk awhile," put in Father. "It's about time Johnny understood some real religion instead of the popy-cock the teachers in Sunday School give them these days. If you'd listen to me, you'd be a lot better off yourself!"

Mother sighed. She turned to Sally and smiled. "Will you pass me the bread, please, dear?"

Father turned to Johnny, whose mouth was jammed full of baked potato and gravy.

"You see, Johnny," said Father, "your mother's got a lot of wrong ideas on religion, too, and she ought to know better. I've been doing my best for years to get her straightened out. You've just got to believe what the Bible says. That's all. It's right there in the Bible! Understand?"

Johnny squirmed under the battery of words. Mother with the wrong ideas on religion—huh! She didn't say much about it, but she was the one that was always doing things for everyone. She wasn't a big blow about it, like Dad. She was O.K.

"Yes, sir, I understand," said Johnny.

Father's voice rambled on in staccato notes. "Son, there's a bad kind of religion and a good kind. People that have the bad kind, you see, sit around, like a bump on a log, not saying a word to help the Kingdom along. People with the good kind, like me, witness for God, like the Bible tells us to do. That answers your question, doesn't it, Johnny?"

Sally leaned forward, her spoon almost at her mouth. This was a repeat performance for her. "But, Dad," she said, "how can you believe everything the Bible says? Do you honestly believe that stuff it says about Adam and Eve and the creation of the world? Why, they tell us at school . . ."

"Listen to me, young lady, you get those ideas out of your head, right now. All that rot about man coming from monkeys and the world breaking off from the sun." Father was shouting. "No wonder young people are more wicked today than ever before! Women wearing short skirts and painting their faces. Even smoking filthy cigarettes. Next thing you know . . . they'll be smoking pipes. They're going to hell, I tell you . . . yes, sir, they're all going to hell."

A frightened look passed over Johnny's face. He looked at Mother and Sally. Their eyes turned to Johnny with a look that said, "You've got to learn this for yourself, Johnny. We did, a long time ago . . ."

Father was shouting again. "As long as you are living under my roof, you're not going to have any such wild ideas. You'll all go straight to hell if you don't change them. I'll have no more talk like this, in my house. Do all of you understand?" Each sentence was punctuated with a crash . . . as Father's fist sent the silverware flying on the table.

Mother's shoulders heaved and slowly sank. Her hands lay folded in her lap. She slowly shook her head with each word. "Yes, Paul, you've said all this before. I'm sure we can't help but understand!"

"I just won't have it—you're sure you've got that!" he roared.

"Yes—yes, Paul!"

Father sharply glanced at Mother. His fists unfolded on the table and his fingers began tapping on the handle of the carving knife.

"Well, now that that's all settled, Mother, let's have our desert!"