



Where there's smoke, there's ire

Caution: Smoking around Jackie may be hazardous

Nobody smokes around my wife. At least, not for long. Either she moves, or they do.

Jackie's the kind of person who, if someone asks, "Do you mind if I smoke?" answers, "I certainly do!" (with an emphasis on "certainly"). Then she stares them straight in the face until they slink away.

For years, while she has gagged, coughed, and complained in the presence of smokers, I have remained silent. At a football game, sitting 57 rows up with the wind blowing at 30 knots, Jackie will fan her face and say in a loud voice, "I've got to move. That man down there (nine rows below) is smoking a cigar."

Seldom does anyone get the best of my wife when it comes to tobacco. There was a time, however, shortly after we moved to our first church in South Carolina, when she met her match.

The church's finance committee met at our house. The chairman, who ran a dry cleaning establishment, called the meeting to order and lit up a cigarette.

"Don't you people have any ashtrays?" he asked, his cigarette already burning.

Jackie, who had come running from the back of the house the moment she smelled tobacco, was standing in the door of the kitchen.

"Sorry," she smirked. "We don't have ashtrays. They encourage lung cancer. You'll either have to go outside or use my expensive china vase."

The finance chairman, who was used to taking people to the cleaners, never blinked. He just reached for Jackie's expensive china vase—and flicked.

After that we had lots of little signs around the house.

"Smokers don't go to hell, they just smell that way."

"If you won't blow smoke on me, I won't vomit on you."

In her behalf, I need to say Jackie has mellowed over the years. She no longer throws open the window and coughs loudly when visiting in someone's home and he lights up; although she may do some fanning if the smoke drifts in her direction.

Also, we have finally bought some Christian ashtrays. We got them at the "Jesus Garbage" convention in Anaheim, California. One says, "Beauty for Ashes." Another is more pentecostal and has a Scripture reference about "tongues of fire."

The one we like best has the picture of Jesus in the bottom—right where you grind out your cigarette.

Actually, I don't object to the smell of smoke as much as my wife (and my mother). The smell of a single cigarette wafting up around a campfire in a pine forest at night is rather attractive. And there are times when I think a good brier pipe filled with sweet tobacco smells good.

"I try not to giggle when someone comes to the altar to 'give it all to Jesus' and her cigarettes spill out of her purse on the floor when she kneels."

But when someone deliberately blows his smoke on me, I admit I have a problem. Smokers should do their thing as I did as a kid—behind the barn. Not on a crowded airplane.

When a man in the elevator puffs his stinky cigar at me, I try to gag unobtrusively.

When some foul-breathed charismatic fumes his "Praise the Lord!" in my face, I hold my breath and hug him back.

And I try not to giggle when someone comes to the altar to "give it all to Jesus" and her cigarettes spill out of her purse on the floor when she kneels.

What others do is their business. It's only when they invade my airspace that I get upset.

Recently my 82-year-old mother, who still thinks Carrie Nation should have been named Secretary of Commerce got up from her seat in the nonsmoking section of the plane and staggered to the restroom. But not without first saying in a voice loud

enough for the people in eight rows to hear: "That woman's smoke is making me sick. I've got to throw up."

Several years ago such a display by my mother—or my wife—would have embarrassed me. Now I realize they are probably right in their assessment. In fact, scientific tests prove that breathing someone else's smoke might not only make you sick—it might kill you.

Smoke from the burning end of a cigarette—called "sidestream smoke"—is potentially more dangerous than smoke inhaled by the smoker.

Sidestream smoke, it seems, contains twice the amount of tar and nicotine and three times as much benzopyrene (a cancer-causing agent) than inhaled smoke.

Cigar and pipe smoke is even more harmful.

That means while I may like the smell of a cigarette in the woods around a campfire, I might be better off inhaling the fumes from my automobile.

There is an effort on the part of a number of community and medical leaders to ban smokers from public places. I think I approve of that. However, it seems Christians—who belong to a different kingdom—should not need laws to give direction. They ought to lead the way by example.

I still remember the man who came rushing into my study at the Baptist Church one Sunday between Sunday school and church. He said the cloud that led the Children of Israel through the wilderness was now hovering over our church.

I rushed out in the parking lot to take a look, only to discover the pillar of smoke was actually caused by a group of deacons taking a puff between services.

Mind you, I'm not saying don't smoke. I'm just saying, if you do, please don't blow it on me.

And unless you enjoy public ridicule, don't blow it on my wife.

A friend asked if I thought folks who chewed tobacco could get into heaven. But that's not the question. The question is where would they spit.

I don't think God bars smokers from heaven, either. But there are times when I hope He puts them all in the same room—and shuts the windows.

But then, if He did that, it would be hell—not heaven. ☞