

# HONOURING YOUR PARENTS

Colossians 3v20,21.

Our text today reminds us of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, which says: “*honour your father and mother.*” But *how* we do this is what I want to explore. Many of you are facing very challenging issues with your parents at this time. My wife and I have elderly parents who are frail and need more care. Liz’s mum lives 150 miles away which adds to our anxiety; my 90 year old step-dad is nearer and so we are more hands-on. But some of you are at a much earlier stage of life and your issues are different.

There are two distinct phases in our relationship to parents - childhood and adulthood. But there is an in-between phase, so I will add in the teen years.

## 1. Honouring your parents when you are a child.

Jesus caused quite a stir by welcoming children. In this he was unique among the Rabbis of His day. There was no prestige to be gained by hordes of scruffy children swamping you. So it is not surprising that teaching in the early church affected the status of children too. Paul addresses children in his letters, including this one.

**Children, obey your parents.** These words are in complete harmony with the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. The way you honour your parents when you are a child is *by obedience*. This is not complicated! As a child you are to do what you are told. **Children, obey your parents in everything.** That’s pretty comprehensive! But we all know it is not as simple as that. Children are born with a natural inclination to *disobedience*. We need to train them to obey – and not just in some sulky, surly way but with a good attitude. This is a big job for parents – and bigger with some children than others! But it’s in a parent’s job description. So, get as much help as you can from other parents and the experts. We learned from Dr. James Dobson and Ross Campbell’s “*How to really love your child*” series. I see Nicky & Sila Lee have just produced ‘The Parenting Book’.

Paul goes on to say: Children, obey your parents in everything **for this pleases the Lord**. Disobedience by children in Roman times would bring harsh punishment. But the motivation here is not fear. It is the prospect of *pleasing God*. Obedience to our parents is the number one way we please God in childhood.

In Ephesians 6v1-3 Paul adds: “*so that it may go well with you*”. He is reminding his hearers that the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment has a promise attached. There is plenty of evidence that a good attitude to parental authority as a child prepares us for standing on our own feet as an adult. It helps develop a healthy attitude to authority – to the government, the police, to teachers, the boss at work and yes, church leaders. And it prepares us for exercising leadership and authority ourselves.

Obedience to parents in childhood is not only right and pleasing to God – it was good for us - and it is good for our children.

## 2. Honouring your parents when you are a teenager.

In Luke 2v41-52 an incident from Jesus' early years is recorded. He and his parents have visited the Temple in Jerusalem on the occasion of his coming of age. This happened for a Jewish boy on his twelfth birthday. So, Jesus is starting on his thirteenth year. He is entering his teens!

Of course, some argue that Hollywood only invented the teenager in the 1950's. Yes, there had always been boys and girls in this age range, but no one particularly noticed them; they even dressed like miniature adults. Until the 1950's films were for adults and about adults, apart from a few child stars like Shirley Temple. But in 1955 this changed with *'Rebel without a Cause'* starring James Dean and later, *West Side Story* (1961). One commentator writes: *"With Hollywood's help, teenagers had become a social culture all to themselves, objects of study with entire industries including film, music, clothing, and psychologists devoted to their needs and desires. Boggles the mind, doesn't it, to think that only some fifty years ago there weren't any teenagers — and now look what we've got."* (Henry P. Raleigh)

Jewish culture recognised this phase in-between childhood and adulthood. In the Jesus incident we see a separation beginning to take place between him and his parents. Jesus had gone missing from the tour party on the way home and he was eventually found debating with the Jerusalem intelligentsia back in the Temple. *"His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them."* (v48-50) They wouldn't be the last to fail to understand their teenager. A change was taking place in their relationship. Joseph in particular, must have felt it when Jesus talked about his "Father's house".

In your teens you experience all sorts of emotional and physical changes. Acceptance by your peers is crucial. You form very strong opinions and start to assert your independence. Most teenagers start to challenge their parents and distance themselves from them. It is tempting for parents to back off when they feel rejected. But, please don't. You may feel unwanted but you are still needed! I don't have the time today to do a Parenting Teenagers seminar. There are good books and recordings available.

But, here's the challenge to you Christian teens! Jesus was still obedient to his parents while He lived under their care. *"Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them... And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men."* (v51, 52) So, obedience is a vital way of honouring parents in your childhood *and teen years*.

But it is different in adulthood. There are other ways of honouring your parents.

### 3. Honouring your parents when you are an adult

As an adult your relationship with your parents should change. Even Jesus had to work this one out. There are one or two glimpses in the Gospels of his mother overstepping the mark with him in adulthood. For example, in Mark 3vv20, 31-35 Jesus' family, with mum at the forefront, try to interfere with his ministry. And so Jesus - who always affirmed the family unit when it was threatened - confronts the family when it threatens the work of the kingdom of God. He said: *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*" I wonder how Mary felt when these words were reported back. Theologian Karl Barth, commenting on this incident, says Jesus was not questioning the importance of family relationships: *"Rather it is one's captivity to these relationships that is questioned. Family structures can be a clannish imprisonment of the person no less than material possessions or worldly fame."*

Whether you are married or single, your relationship with your parents should change in adulthood.

If you are married a clear principle is laid out as early as the second chapter of the Bible. You are *"to leave"* your parents in order *"to cleave"* to your husband or wife. When God presents Adam with a woman to share his life we read: *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."* (Genesis 2v24) In his classic book *"I Married You"*, Walter Trobisch writes: *"There must be a clean and clear cut. Just as a newborn baby cannot grow up unless the umbilical cord is cut so marriage cannot grow up and develop as long as no real leaving, no clear separation from one's family, takes place."*

Some parents make this difficult. They won't let go. This usually reflects their neediness or a desire to keep control. But sometimes it is grown-up sons or daughters who are at fault; they keep looking to their mum or dad rather than their partner. Some cultures even encourage this and the effects are evident in these societies. But we are trying to think biblically, not promote a particular culture.

If you are married, and both you and your spouse have truly *"left"* both sets of parents, then you should be able to say something like this:

1. Our parents authority over us has ceased
2. We need to develop our own (family) identity.
3. Setting up home with them would require exceptional circumstances
4. Their responsibility for us has come to an end.
5. We should not expect them to keep rescuing us
6. We should be able to take or leave their advice
7. They must allow us to resolve conflicts without interfering and we should not encourage them to take sides.
8. Caring for our new family unit is our first priority
9. We must leave behind any longing for parental nurture we missed out on.

But leaving our parents is not *abandoning* them. In fact being able to “*leave*” should create breathing space in which love between parents and children can move into a new phase.

So how do we keep on honouring our father and mother when we are adults, whether we are married or single? Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Show respect – speak to and about them with courtesy
2. Express gratitude and appreciation when appropriate.
3. Be gentle when telling them about changes they might find difficult.
4. Receive well; allow them to help you and be generous from time to time.
5. Be straightforward: talk issues through so they appreciate how you feel
6. Offer help when there is a special need; take the initiative this shows you care but it also means *you* set the agenda, not them.
7. Don't encourage impossible expectations like visiting every Sunday for lunch!
8. Be thoughtful. Let them know they're not forgotten e.g. small acts of kindness
9. Be forgiving over hurts, and be reconciled - don't put it off!

Of course, a lot may depend on whether you live far away or near your parents, as well as health factors, serious illness and aging. These things may create a closer bond but they can also bring unbearable stress. Some people go far beyond the extra mile and willingly give the best years of their life to caring for aging parents; they may even forfeit marriage and their own family because of it.

But we must be very careful. It is possible for our parents' needs to control us right up to their final breath. We do have a responsibility of care – but sometimes this may take the form of making sure they are cared for by others. Jesus Himself gave us this model by entrusting the care of his mother to a cousin, the apostle John. (John 19v25-27) I know that some people feel terrible guilt if a parent has to go to a retirement or nursing home, but this may be the best way care can be offered.

If your childhood experience of parents is very painful then you need God's grace in abundance to honour them when you are an adult. Parents, you need to realise that the way you treat your children today will affect your relationship with them in the future. So, in the final part of our text Paul lays some groundwork for this.

**v21: Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.** Fathers are mentioned specifically because, in first century society, they lorded it over their children, often with great severity. So Paul urges fathers not to provoke their children causing anger and resentment to build up. It is possible to crush a child's spirit in childhood leaving them emotionally disabled and full of bitterness.

This seems a very negative angle to come at parenting from. Perhaps the reason is the serious danger of a father distorting *God's Fatherhood* for their children. Dads, your high calling is to reflect and express the Fatherhood of God in the home! I have

come across plenty of people who have difficulty with the opening words of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father in heaven") because of their childhood experiences.

Some have had *harsh* fathers who were cruel and abusive; others have had a *passive* father who abdicated responsibility or a *controlling* father who tried to shape you to suit his own plans. Some have had *demanding* fathers whose expectations were impossible to meet or had a *pre-occupied* father too busy with other things; or even a *weak* father who let the children rule the roost. None of these characteristics reflect the fatherhood of God.

Godly fathering involves the very opposite. No dad will be perfect, we know that. But throughout their childhood and teens our sons and daughters should get some idea of what godly manhood is all about, and what it means to be a loving Christian husband and father.

Of course, some have never known their father. Mine died when I was three so I have no memory of him. And it's amazing how many leaders on the world stage could look back on less than satisfactory fathers – men like Martin Luther, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and Barak Obama. But the good news is that, whatever our experience of fathering, we can experience the Father Heart of God. By faith in Jesus Christ and God's grace we are adopted into God's family. "*I am the way the truth and the life,*" said Jesus, "*no one comes to the Father but by me.*" (John 14v6) Whoever you are and whatever your background, today you can know the love of a Heavenly Father.

**John Wilthew. November 2009.**

## Message Summary

### HONOURING YOUR PARENTS

Colossians 3v20,21.

**v20.** “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord”. These words are in complete harmony with the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment: “honour your father and mother.” (**Exodus 20v12**) But how do we do this? We will look at this from three angles. There are two distinct phases in our relationship to parents - childhood and adulthood. But there is an in-between phase, the teen years.

**1. Honouring your parents when you are a child:** This is not complicated; as a child you do what you are told! *In everything!* But we know it is not as simple as that! We need to be trained to obey. “*This pleases the Lord.*” Obedience to our parents is the number one way we please God in childhood. In **Ephesians 6v1-3** Paul adds: “*so that it may go well with you*”. There is plenty of evidence that a good attitude to parental authority as a child prepares us for standing on our own feet as an adult. It helps develop a healthy attitude to authority and prepares us for exercising leadership and authority ourselves. It is good for us!

**2. Honouring your parents when you are a teenager:** In **Luke 2v41-52** an incident from Jesus’ early years is recorded when He and His parents visit Jerusalem on the occasion of his coming of age. This happened for a Jewish boy on his twelfth birthday. OK, there is a year’s difference, but from our perspective this is a bit like Jesus becoming teenager. We see a separation beginning between him and his parents. Jesus’ parents needed to recognise the change taking place. Yet Jesus was still obedient to them while He lived under their care. (v51, 52)

**3. Honouring your parents when you are an adult:** As an adult your relationship with your parents should change. Even Jesus had to work this one out. See **Mark 3vv20, 31-35** where Jesus’ family, with mum at the forefront, try to interfere with his ministry. If you are married a clear principle is laid out as early as the second chapter of the Bible. You are “*to leave*” your parents in order “*to cleave*” to your husband or wife. (**Genesis 2v24**) Some parents make this difficult; they won’t let go. But sometimes it is grown-up sons or daughters who are at fault; they keep looking to their mum or dad rather than their partner. But leaving our parents is not abandoning them. There are plenty of ways we can still honour our parents when we are adults whether we are married or single. But we must be very careful. It is possible for our parents’ needs to control us. We do have a responsibility of care, but this may take the form of making sure they are cared for by others. (**John 19v25-27**)

If your childhood experience of parents is very painful then you need God’s grace in abundance to honour them when you are an adult. Parents need to realise that the way they treat their children today will affect their relationship with them in the future. In the next phrase Paul lays some groundwork for this. **v21:** “*Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged*”. This seems a very negative angle to come at parenting from. Perhaps the reason is the serious danger of a father distorting *God’s Fatherhood* for their children. Throughout their childhood and teens our sons and daughters should get some idea of what godly manhood is all about, and what it means to be a loving Christian husband and father. The good news is that, whatever our experience of fathering, we can experience the Father Heart of God. By faith in Jesus Christ we are adopted into God’s family.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Read the summary first and then only use the questions which suit your group best.*

Honouring your parents when you are a child

- 1. Looking back on your own childhood - were you at the compliant or challenging end of the spectrum as far as obedience was concerned?**
- 2. Has your childhood shaped you in ways you can easily identify? What have you learned from your upbringing that you value?**
- 3. What is the greatest gift a parent can give a child?**
- 4. What books etc would you recommend on parenting?**

Honouring your parents when you are a teenager

- 5. If you are a teenager – what are the biggest difficulties you face in relating to your parents? How could you and they make things better?**
- 6. If you are the parents of teenagers – what are the biggest difficulties you face in relating to your teenager(s)? How could you and they make things better?**

Honouring your parents when you are an adult

- 7. If you are, or have been, married, how did you find the “leaving” process from your parents or in-laws? What specific issues did you face?**
- 8. Whether you are single or married, how did you and your parents handle the change in your relationship when you became an adult?**
- 9. What did you make of theologian Karl Barth’s comment on the incident in Mark 3v31-35? He said that Jesus was not questioning the importance of family relationships: *“Rather it is one’s captivity to these relationships that is questioned. Family structures can be a clannish imprisonment of the person no less than material possessions or worldly fame.”***
- 10. What are the biggest issues you face today with your parents?**

*Many of the issues raised by your discussion can be turned into prayer for one another.*