

It was not easy to be a child in Jesus' day. About twenty-five percent of children born in the first-century died in the first year. 50% never made it to their tenth birthday. Because children were so fragile, they weren't considered people until they were well on their way to being an adult. Fathers had absolute authority to do with their kids as they chose. The Greek word for the man of the house was *paterfamilias* ...head of the family. When a child was born, they would lay it at the feet of the *paterfamilias*. If he picked it up the baby became part of the family. But if he left it on the floor and walked away, usually, that child would be taken outside and left for dead. There were actually places designated for leaving abandoned babies so others could come by and take them to be raised as slaves or prostitutes. Children born with health problems were often killed.

So in *that* setting, imagine what it sounded like when Jesus said (Luke 18), "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to them, too." In that one sentence, Jesus turned everything that culture believed about human life upside down. He taught them that every life deserves honor.

And actually, *that* is very much a part of the biblical teaching on honoring parents. Because it is in the context of family that we best learn to model the design of God ... which is really a system of mutual respect. **(SHOW CIRCLE)** Children respecting parents, parents respecting God, God respecting children. So if we're talking about finding solutions that bring a healthy balance into the family mix, this teaching on honoring our parents is key. At the center of it, is the call to honor God. Because we are *his* children, we are called to honor God. And through God, who gives the gift of life, we're given children who are called to honor their parents ... who are called to honor God. God's design is powered by a circle of respect that is both God-centered and God-focused. The call to honor father and mother is central to the God-design.

So let's talk about this God design, beginning with our children. Ephesians 6:1-3 says - *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother"— which is the first commandment with a promise— 3 "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."* In verses 2 and 3, Paul is quoting the fifth of the ten commandments. And I don't know why but every time I hear that commandment, I hear Bill Cosby saying, "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it." Can you hear that in there? "Honor your mother and your father so that you may enjoy long life ... because they brought you into this world ..."

This verse in Ephesians is also the only commandment in the Bible directed toward children and it has one simple instruction: obey your parents. That means ... kids ... listen to your parents' directions and do your best to carry out what they ask of you. What Paul actually says here is, "Obey your parents *in the Lord.*" That's a reminder that we are God's children first. So when I do what my parents ask me to do, I'm not just being a good team player. I'm learning how to live in God's family. I'm learning obedience to God.

Parents, I hope you hear this ... that when you're training up your child, the point is not just to get them to behave or to do what you say ... whatever the cost. The goal is to help your child cultivate an obedient spirit ... so they can bring that spirit into their relationship with God. By teaching obedience at home, we're cultivating an obedient spirit that prepares them to obey Christ. That's the goal ... to cultivate an obedient spirit for the sake of Christ. I wonder how that resonates with you as you think about how you were brought up?

You see ... getting someone to comply with a set of rules is very different from cultivating an obedient spirit. Really, it is the difference between *breaking* a kid's spirit and **cultivating** his

spirit. For example, how much force you use in your home ... either through physical punishment or through manipulation or intimidation ... that determines whether you are breaking a spirit or cultivating it. A parent can be very successful at getting a kid to do as they are told without asking questions, but that parent may completely miss the mark on cultivating an obedient spirit. When a parent imposes his will on a child in an angry or forceful way, what he's really doing is building anger in the child ... anger that will eventually surface as rebellion. This is why Paul says in the very next verse (Ephesians 6:4) – *Fathers do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

When we moved to Wilmore, Kentucky to go to seminary, we met these two girls who ran a bed and breakfast. They were in their early twenties, but really mature and loving. Our first day there, they helped unpack the truck and then fed us dinner by candlelight. And they didn't even know us. The next morning they brought fresh rolls by. They were extraordinarily loving people and even at their age, there was no spirit of rebellion about them ... just this wonderfully generous and faithful spirit. After we got to know them, I asked one of them how she got that way ... how she managed to escape what so many kids deal with in their college years and early twenties. Her dad was a preacher, and she said, "My father lived at home what he preached from the pulpit." I have to tell you ... that humbled me. I've fallen so far short of that goal, but for the last fifteen years since hearing that comment, that's been at the heart of my own parenting. I want my child to see the same spirit of obedience in me when we're home that I talk about when I am in front of people. Because when my child sees a spirit of obedience toward God in me, then she learns it as a way of life for herself. What does your personal example of obedience to God *in your home* teach your child about the spirit of obedience?

For our children, the early years are about obedience, and the middle years are about honor. The great teaching on how to treat our parents is that one verse Paul quoted from Deuteronomy 5:16 - *Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

Let's take a moment to put that commandment into perspective. This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments given by God to the people of Israel. Most scholars would agree that the Ten Commandments are placed in order of priority. They begin with the most important thing, which is to worship God alone, to have no other gods before the one, true God. Then the next three commandments teach us how to honor God. Don't worship images or idols. Don't misuse God's name, and give one day every week to God's honor, as a way of remembering everything he has brought you through. So the ten commandments begin with our relationship to God and teach us how to honor him. Then ... at the fifth commandment, our attention turns to human relationships and the first commandment to address our human relationships is this call to honor our parents. Beneath that commandment is the one about murder, and then adultery and then stealing, lying and coveting. And remember ... these commandments have an order of priority to them ... so ... why would it be more important to honor our parents than to *not* murder or commit adultery? Well ... its not that those things are somehow less wrong. The point is that ... a life rightly ordered ... with that God-design in place ... shapes every other relationship and decision. Let me say that again: ***how we relate to our parents shapes every other relationship and decision in our lives.*** Our parents shape us. And how we honor them also shapes us.

This is interesting. The Hebrew word for “honor” literally means “to be heavy.” It can also mean, “to glorify or to ascribe value and respect to; or to hold in high regard.” But I like that phrase “to be heavy.” Do you get what that means? Its about feeling the weight of appreciation. That’s different than lip-service. That’s different than simply doing what they say because they are the parents and their word goes. To truly honor your parents means to feel the weight of your appreciation for them ... to feel the weight of their value as human beings. That’s what it means to “be heavy.” So ... now ... I want to try this with the teens in the room ... and the young adults. Take out your cell phone. And while you’re holding it, stop and think about how the food gets in the refrigerator, how the soap gets in the shower, how the air-conditioner kicks on when its hot, how that cell phone bill gets paid ... and for just a minute, let yourself feel heavy with appreciation for your parents. Now ... send a text to your mom or dad that says, “I really want you to know I appreciate all you do for me. I don’t say it much, but I mean it.”

While you’re doing that, let me say a word those of you whose parents have *not* been so great. What if you have *not* had a great relationship with your mom or dad? Maybe you lived with an angry, negative father or a harsh and judgmental mom. And maybe it went beyond just them being imperfect people. Maybe, instead of cultivating a positive spirit in you, they broke your spirit. How can those who have had dishonorable parents follow this call to honor them? Well, first, I think we have to acknowledge that there’s no escape clause in the commandments. God never said we should honor our parents if they deserve it any more than he said we shouldn’t steal unless we really need something. He just says, “Honor your father and mother.” Period. So how do we do that, when they don’t deserve it?

Well, the answer, I think, is in Jesus and in His spirit of grace. The best way to honor a parent who has not been good to us is to forgive them. And I know that forgiveness is a process, but every process has to begin somewhere. An maybe that can begin for you today ... maybe you can begin to walk in forgiveness by choosing that as your default feeling toward your parent rather than choosing bitterness and anger. To walk in forgiveness doesn't mean we become their best friend or they become ours. In fact, it requires that we acknowledge the hurt ... but then we lay down our right to be repaid somehow. We cancel the debt. We no longer hold that offense against them. And for some of us, that may be the most difficult decision of our lives ... that choice to walk in obedience to God by honoring our parents in that way. It will also be our most freeing moment. How is God calling you ... as an adult ... to honor your parents?

In their early years, we cultivate a spirit of obedience in our children so they are able to honor God and their parents from the heart. As adults, we learn to honor our parents as a way of witnessing to our faith in God. We learn to be heavy with appreciation for them. And as our parents age, we honor them best by treating them with respect. The prophet Joel heard the Lord speak about a day when the Holy Spirit would be poured out over all people (Joel 2:28) - "*And afterward (the Lord said), I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Men and women will prophesy. Young men will become visionaries. And God says that elder adults will be the ones who bear the dreams of God. And so we are called to respect an elder's wisdom and their connection to God. We honor our aging parents by seeing them as a source of wisdom, and respecting their place in life. And we can also respect them by respecting their dreams.*

I'd like to give you four practical thoughts on honoring the elder adults in our life.

1. ***Give them things to pray for.*** Betty taught us through her testimony that there's nothing more powerful than a praying mama. God hears the prayers of the saints. Faithful older adults are a powerful source of prayer support. Share your needs and the needs of your children with them and ask for their prayers.
2. ***Send them words of encouragement.*** Teenagers, I want to challenge you to befriend at least one older adult on your Facebook page. Older than me, even. Older adults appreciate social connections. Send them a note on Facebook or by email ... or better yet, by regular mail.
3. ***Respect their dreams and decisions.*** Your parents may not do everything the way you'd do it, but they've made it a long way on their own brain power. If they choose to ride a motorcycle to Colorado at the age of eighty, respect that. Better yet, ask them for their bucket list and help them live it out. Go with them, if they'd like your company.
4. ***Spend time with them.*** More than anything, our parents want our time ... no matter what their age or yours. Get into a routine of calling weekly or visiting. Make it a weekly appointment that you both look forward to. You will benefit every bit as much as your parents do. They may not want to impose, but they want your time.

Honor your father and your mother, so that you can enjoy your own life on this earth. It is how God has designed us to work. Obedience. Honor. Respect.