

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle with Authority
Honor your Father and your Mother
Exodus 20:12

A mother that had scrimped and saved to put her son through college sat at her son's graduation. She watched as he walked across the platform and received his degree with honors. As he walked down the aisle, instead of turning into the designated row for graduates, he kept walking straight ahead, down to where his mother sat in the audience. The young man threw his arms around her neck, kissed her on the cheek, and as he placed his diploma in her hands, he said, "Here, Mother, you earned it!"

Observing that scene, one might conclude here is a young man who knows the meaning of the Fifth Commandment found in Exodus 20:12, "*Thou shalt honor your father and mother.*"

But complying with the requirements of Fifth Commandment is much more complex than simply publicly thanking a parent for their support. **Honoring your father and mother is a life-long endeavor that looks different in each phase of your life.**

There are three primary phases of life as it relates to honoring parents: when the sons and daughters are children, young adults, and middle-aged adults. Each phase brings a different way in which honoring of parents is to be accomplished. And each phases brings a corresponding change in the responsibility in parenting.

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	
As Young Adults		
As Middle-Aged Adults		

As children the primary responsibility in honoring parents is **to obey**. Turn in the Scriptures to Ephesians 6:1, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*" Paul then supports this instruction to children by basing it upon the Fifth Commandment, which he quotes in verse 2. "*Honor your father and mother.*"

One Sunday School class was asked to list the Ten Commandments. When they came to the Fifth Commandment, one boy wrote, "Humor your father and mother." Another child, not being a good speller wrote, "Honor your pirates." While parents are neither pirates nor do they need humoring, children are to honor them by obeying them.

Paul then adds in Ephesians 6:2 a commentary noting the Fifth Commandment is the first commandment with a promise, *“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”*

When the Fifth Commandment was originally given, the promise was made to the nation as a whole. Exodus 20:12, *“Honor your father and your mother, so that you (i.e., the nation) may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”*

That which had been a national benefit to honor parents becomes, through Paul’s application, a personal incentive for children to obey their parents. Why does obedience generally lead toward a healthy, productive, long life? Two reasons are apparent:

(1) By obeying our parents, we learn to submit to authority. Our struggle with authority starts when we are children. Will we obey our parents when we are a toddler, a ten year old, or a teen? If we don’t learn to submit to authority within the home, it will be hard to submit to other authority outside the home, including God. The sooner we learn to submit to authority, the sooner we learn to submit to God. The sooner we learn to follow God’s directions, the sooner we walk paths of wise living. As we walk in wisdom, *“it may go well with you and you may enjoy long life on the earth.”*

(2) By obeying your parents, you avoid risky behaviors and disastrous detours. Your parents want the best for you. Obey them. Even when you don’t agree or don’t think they know best, obey them. It will *“go well with you and you may enjoy long life on the earth.”*

One night stands out when I think back over the years of our parenting as Miriam and I raised our three daughters. Although strong willed, our children were good kids and were generally obedient. But I remember the night that obedient response was tested. One of our daughters was 15 and had begun to date a young man from the church youth group. As we got to know him more and more, we saw unhealthy characteristics that would be dangerous for an ongoing relationship. Most troublesome, we observed he was controlling and angry. After prayerfully discussing what to do for several days, the evening came when Miriam and I sat down with our daughter and told her she was no longer to have a relationship with this guy. The objections. The arguments. The tears. The objections. The arguments. The tears. At 10 PM, I finally had all the interaction I could take. I headed to our bedroom, leaving the resolution to feminine discussions, which went on until after Midnight. Thank God for mothers when it comes to interacting with daughters. She didn’t agree with our decision, but she agreed to obey it. We gave her two options, *“Do you want us to tell him, or do you want us to tell him?”* She wanted to tell him. The next time I saw the young man, my assessment of one of his troubling characteristics—his anger—was confirmed.

Why did we step in and do this for our daughter? It was because of the primary responsibility of parents when their sons and daughters are children: **to provide.**

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults		
As Middle-Aged Adults		

Parents are to provide a place of safety for our children—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. As parents we provide safety, physically: we provide nutritious meals, clean bathrooms, and approved car seats. We provide safety, spiritually: we pray with and for them, we join a Bible-believing church and volunteer in the Kids Worship program (right?). And we provide safety, emotionally: we go to their ballgames and recitals, we attend parent-teacher conferences; and we step in when we see flashing red lights in front of the path they are taking. That’s why Miriam and I stepped in to stop her romantic relationship. It was not to exercise power or control and certainly not to break her heart. It was because God has given parents the primary role of providers of safety during the childhood phase of life.

Perhaps you would like to hear, as Paul Harvey puts it, “the rest of the story?” Six years after that incident, our daughter was working as a server at a local restaurant. She was the only open believer among the entire wait staff, bus boys, dish crew, and administration. One day she overheard the name of her former boyfriend being discussed. She said, “I know him. We used to date.” Knowing my daughter lived a righteous life, they were shocked that she knew him. He was, after all, the drug dealer supplying all the users working at the restaurant. Our daughter came home that night and said to Miriam and me, “Thanks, mom and dad, for stepping in and stopping me from dating him. My career goal never included being the wife of a drug dealer.”

[Are there any limitations to the command for children to obey their parents? Obviously, yes. In Acts 4:19-20 the Apostles Peter and John set forth the principle that subjection under authorities, such as government or parents, is limited. When asked to no longer be witnesses for Christ, they said: “*Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge, for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.*”

If children or teens are asked by their parents to do something illegal or unethical, they must disobey. If you have been sexually abused, and your father says, “Hush, you must keep it a secret,” you disobey and reveal the sin. If your mother says, “Slip this digital camera into your coat pocket and meet me by the car,” you say, “No way.” If your parents ever ask you to disobey God, you are not breaking the Fifth Commandment when you disobey your parents.]

When does this obligation to obey your parents end? This obligation of obedience obviously ends at marriage when a new family unit has begun: “*For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh*” (Gen. 2:24).

I believe the obligation for obedience also ends when the young adult establishes his own household as a single adult, independent of the financial support of his parents. No

longer does the son or daughter obey. But the command to honor remains. How is the responsibility of sons and daughters expressed as young adults? **To Respect.**

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults	Respect	
As Middle-Aged Adults		

In the Old Testament respect for one's parents was commanded. *"Every one of you shall reverence his mother and his father"* (Lev. 19:3). Any direct disrespect was severely punished. *"And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death"* (Ex. 21:15).

Respect is shown, not just by avoiding disrespectful behavior like hitting the old man, but by a listening attitude. The word "honor" literally means to "give weight to" or "regard as heavy." When your parent says something, don't take it lightly. Listen to your parents' advice.

Mark Twain once said, "When I was 14 years old, my father was so ignorant I hated to have the old man around. But when I was 21 years old, I was astonished to see how much my father had learned in only 7 years."

If "respect" is the responsibility of the young adult sons and daughters, what is the corresponding responsibility of parents of those who have moved into their young adult years? **To Let Go.**

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults	Respect	Let Go
As Middle-Aged Adults		

But the transition from childhood to young adulthood is difficult for many parents. I loved those years of my daughters' childhood, in many ways the best memories of my life. But time waits for no man, and time transmutes childhood into adulthood whether we want it to or not. Time transformed my little girls into college co-eds. But the fact is, we had to let them go. I loved them as children but now this poem is what I say:

*It was hard to let you go:
To watch womanhood reach out and snatch you
Long before the parenting was done.
But if God listened to parents and gave in,
Would the time for turning loose of daughters ever come?*

*It was hard when you went away--
For how was to know
The serendipity of letting go
Would be seeing you come home again
Meeting in a new way
Adult to adult,
Friend to friend.*

The third phase of life that demands the honoring of parents is when the sons and daughters enter their middle adult years and their parents transition into the older adult generation. Honoring then means **To Support**.

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults	Respect	Let Go
As Middle-Aged Adults	Support	

Support takes on two forms, financial provision and personal attention. Jesus had harsh words for those who could financially support their parents, but wouldn't. In the society in which Jesus lived, there was a need for children to care for their aging parents. But sometimes those who wanted to look righteous did not want the financial burden. So, instead of having their money available to help their parents, the scribes and Pharisees would work out an arrangement with the temple authorities to proclaim their assets, "Corban," which means "belonging to God." Then, technically, it was God's money, though they still got to use it. In this way, they could say they didn't have any money to help their folks because it all was "Corban, belonging to God." We read Jesus' attitude about this financial loophole in Mark 7:9-13.

"You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother" and, "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death." But you say, "If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God), you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition" (Mark 7:9-13).

[The apostle Paul also underscores the importance of taking care of one's own rather than expecting the church (or government) to do it: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8).]

But even beyond providing for their physical needs financially, our aging parents need something even more precious—our personal attention.

[Jesus made sure that his mother was going to be cared for not just financially, but personally. Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, the husband of Mary, had apparently died sometime between when Jesus was 12 (when we observed Jesus at the Temple in Luke 2), and inception of his public ministry. Joseph was not mentioned as being present at the wedding at Cana of Galilee, nor was he mentioned as being alive on any other occasion in the Gospels. Jesus took upon himself the support of his mother. Even in his death, one of Jesus' seven last statements was to make provision for his mother:

"When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household." (John 19:26-27)

The priority that Jesus gave to the future care of His mother, even while He was engaged in the work of saving the world, shows the value of caring for a father or mother in the heart of God.]

It is easy for us to become so busy with important things that we forget or neglect prioritizing our aging parents. Visiting or phoning parents can be an important part of honoring them.

If the responsibility of the son or daughter is to support the aging parent, what is the reciprocal responsibility of the parent? **To Leave a Legacy.**

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults	Respect	Let Go
As Middle-Aged Adults	Support	Leave a Legacy

When the parent approaches the end of their days on earth, may they bequeath to their children, and their children's children, a legacy. That legacy may include a will whereby ministries of the Lord you loved in life are supported in death.

But even more importantly, it is the responsibility of aging fathers and mothers to leave a legacy of a godly life. To be able to say, *"My son, observe the commandment of your father, And do not forsake the teaching of your mother; Bind them continually on your heart; Tie them around your neck. When you walk about, they will guide you; When you sleep, they will watch over you; And when you awake, they will talk to you"* (Prov. 6:20-22).

That's the kind of legacy I want to leave to my children, and to my (now six) grandchildren. This morning I received an e-mail from Charity in Morelia, Mexico. "God did it again! He created a beautiful human being inside my tummy! Gabriela was born around 4:45 PM on Feb. 24th, weighing in a 6.5 pounds and was 19.3 inches long. With very blond curly hair and deep ocean-blue eyes, she's gorgeous. Eden is a proud—and very possessive—big sister."

A legacy does not require perfection. Mistakes will be made and sins will be committed. But the platinum legacy will have rebuilt damaged relationships: every mistake has been owned and every apology has been voiced without excuses.

Now you see the filled-in chart showing the three phases of life, both for sons and daughters and for fathers and mothers. You may have found yourself in one or more of the sectors.

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide
As Young Adults	Respect	Let Go
As Middle-Aged Adults	Support	Leave a Legacy

But let me mention two warnings: one for parents and the other for the offspring.

For the parent it is what I call, **“The Danger of the Switch-a-roo”**

Instead of providing for their children, some parents have been looking to their children to provide for them.

Phase of Life	Responsibility of Sons and Daughters	Responsibility of Dads and Moms
As Children	Obey	Provide for me!
As Young Adults	Respect	Provide for me!
As Middle-Aged Adults	Support	Leave a Legacy

Parents must not look toward their children and teens to provide for them emotionally. It is true your children may someday express love and appreciation, but it usually isn't when they are babies, toddler, pre-schoolers, grade schoolers, or (dare I say) teenagers. If you are looking to your sons and daughters for validation, you may well be disappointed. Your validation must come from God for a job well done as you provide for your kids physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Parents sometimes have to make unpopular decisions, and if you have become emotionally dependent on the approval of your child, you won't be able to stand up and lead. A wise father once said to his son, “If I ever have to choose between being your father and being your friend, I will always choose the role of your father. You have many friends, but you have only one father.”

Furthermore, parents who become emotionally dependent on their children will also be in difficulty when the time comes for these children to establish their independence. Instead of being able to let go, the parent will hang on and cling with verbal or non-verbal demands: “Please provide for me!” Using your children to fulfill your unmet needs will

bring damage both to them and to you. The healthy parent is the one who finds his or her sufficiency in God and therefore is free to serve those God has placed in his or her care.

But I said I had two warnings: one for parents and the other for the offspring. The second of the two warnings is directed toward sons and daughters who have the challenge of honoring a parent who is dishonorable. It is what I call **“The Danger of False Guilt.”**

Some parents are not worthy of honor and trying to come within their orbit—even as adults—is still not safe. The last thing I would want to do is to, on the basis of the Fifth Commandment, heap on you a dose of false guilt. Certainly, knowing how to relate to unworthy parents can be one of the greatest struggles of life.

The Bible has plenty of examples of dishonorable parents. Saul was both an ineffective king and an abusive father. His son Jonathan had to endure Saul’s wild mood swings, his fits of rage, and his irrational behavior. On one occasion, Saul threw a spear at Jonathan, intending “to kill him” (1 Samuel 20:33). What kind of father throws a spear at his son?

I know from my confidential conversations with many of you dear people, that some of you have parents who have literally, or figuratively, thrown a spear at you. And it is still not safe to go back into that room with your parent.

God knows about the hidden abuse that goes on in too many families. Maybe in yours. Bad parenting brings great pain and can leave deep wounds that only God is able to heal. God knows the truth, and He does not ask you to pretend that bad parents were good or that a neglectful parent is honorable. Nor does He expect that you must continue to put yourself in the position of being emotionally abused all over again by trying to obey The Fifth Commandment.

How can you honor a parent who has been and may still be dishonorable? You may find it helpful to think about the unworthy parent as one who did not have the wisdom, sufficiency or love to do their job well. What they did not receive, they were not able to give. Seeing their need may help you to have compassion and may keep you from bitterness.

If your parents are still unrepentant and un-teachable, you may still be alienated from them. But even if the relationship has broken down, you can ask God to give you compassion for them. Pray that God will give them what they lack. That’s the Spirit of Jesus: He does not treat us as our sins deserve. He wants us to know that the door to reconciliation is always open on His side, and He reaches out to draw us in that direction.

If you have suffered through abused authority, you may have feared the authority of God, and therefore kept at a distance from Him. But the healing of many wounds will begin as you look up into the face of God and find him so unlike your own parents. God can make

it possible for you to break free from the cycle of unworthy parenting that otherwise might be passed on from one generation to the next.

Our struggle with authority starts when we are children. Will we obey our parents when we are a toddler, a ten year old, or a teen? If we don't learn to submit to authority within the home, it will be hard to submit to other authority outside the home, including God. Difficult, but, by God's mercy, not impossible.

Remember the young man who wanted to date my daughter and went on to a career as drug dealer? As a child he had not obeyed his parents. As a teen, he had resisted our rules. As a young adult, he broke laws, avoiding arrest in the NE Precinct by Officer Georgioff.

But God, in his mercy never gave up on that young man. The Holy Spirit kept pursuing him until he finally submitted to God. He entered a drug rehabilitation program through Teen Challenge. And—what a delightful sense of humor God has—a couple years ago he entered Multnomah Bible College. He signed up to take music courses from Miriam and a theology course from me. Without anger, he submitted to our authority too as teachers in his life. And now you know, the rest of the story.