



Honoring One's Parents and Healing the Wounds of Childhood

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What does it mean to “Honor your father and mother” as it relates to one’s emotional healing? “Honor your father and mother” (Deuteronomy 5:16) is one of the Ten Commandments, and the Christian can hardly dismiss it. If one perceives one’s mother and father to have done a particularly good job of parenting, then it may not seem to be an issue. Honoring them by expressing love and gratitude, blessing them, and helping to care for them as they age may all flow naturally from one’s heartfelt desires. But what if one’s parents were hurtful, whether they meant to be or not? Or, in the extreme case, what if they were outright evil? (We don’t want to believe it happens, but it does. Some people who are parents choose evil and act it out on their children.) God, of course, is not surprised by any of these possibilities. Can God really mean for all His disciples to follow this commandment, regardless of what kind of parents they had? We believe that when understood correctly, observing this commandment will lead to good things all around, such as healing, blessing, stopping the cycle of destructive patterns passed down in the family, forgiveness, and reconciliation where possible. However, it is not uncommon to miss the real meaning of this commandment – it gets co-opted by our psychological defenses and our lie-based thinking, and warped into meaning all kinds of unhealthy things which we do not believe God intended.

What honoring our parents does *not* mean

1. Keeping them “happy,” never disagreeing, always obeying them. Honoring one’s parents does not mean keeping one’s parents “happy,” or always agreeing with or obeying them. It is important to note here that the fifth commandment does *not* read “Make sure your parents feel honored” meaning that you haven’t fully complied with the commandment until your parents report feeling a certain way. The emphasis is on the child’s honoring, not on the parent’s response.

First, remember that another adult’s emotional state is not under your control. It is natural to want to bless people you love, and to want to see them happy. It is not possible, however, to ensure that they will always be happy, because the causes of their unhappiness are usually not their present situations, but their “lies” learned in their painful life experiences. To stop the pain and return to a “happy” state, the parent will need to take responsibility for his own emotions, and then hear a healing word of truth from the Spirit of Christ at the point of his pain. No one else – child, friend, pastor, or your parent’s own parent – can make him or her go through that healing process. He or she must be willing and wanting to do so. Much as we may want to see our parents healed and happy, at a deep level, it is not our decision whether or not they are. Honoring our parents cannot be defined as keeping them happy, because God would not command us to do something we do not have authority or means to carry out.

The primary problem with defining “honoring” as “agreeing” is that it compromises truth. If, in your heart of hearts, you don’t see things the same way as your parents, then “agreeing” will inherently require lying. If you “make” yourself agree through denial or some other form of self-deception, you are lying to yourself. If you say you agree when you really don’t, you are lying to others.

“Defining “honoring” as “obeying” runs into two major problems. The first is that obeying your parents in all circumstances could require you to disobey God. For example, suppose your father is involved in business fraud and he tells you to assist him, including participation in covering up the crime. He says you should put your loyalty to him above all other considerations. God does not contradict himself. Obeying the fifth commandment (honoring parents) should not mean violating the first (have no other gods before Me), the eighth (do not steal) and the ninth (do not bear false witness). The second problem has to do with abdicating personal responsibility for one's decisions. In childhood, and especially the younger the child is, simple obedience is appropriate. In many areas of life, the child is not capable of making good decisions for himself, and is appropriately not held responsible for doing so. The parent decides and the child obeys. However, as the child grows, so must his experience and capacity in decision-making and in taking responsibility for himself. This is a major part of what it means to “grow up.” To hold to honoring one's parents as meaning that one will always obey them, even when well into one's own adulthood, means, in some respects not fully growing up. It will probably also be accompanied by anger and blaming on the part of the adult child toward the parent if following the parent's orders does not seem to produce a good result – the child will naturally hold the parent responsible, since he (the child) did not take responsibility for himself.

It is possible, however, to choose to defer to someone else's opinion without abdicating one's own adult responsibility for one's decisions. In a marriage, in a business relationship, or other “team” settings, it is not uncommon to have disagreement as to the best course of action, even after an open and honest dialogue about the various options has taken place. At that point, you may decide – as a free-willed adult taking responsibility for your decision – to defer to someone else's plan. The key difference is in truly having a choice of whether or not to go along with the other. An adult child may even decide to defer to his parent's preference in some matter (that does not compromise his own integrity and faith) as an expression of honoring his parent. But if that same adult child decides *not* to defer to the parent for some reason, he still may be honoring his parent. “Honoring” and “obeying” may coincide at times, but they are not synonymous.

2. Seeing them as perfect. Honoring one's parents does not mean seeing them as “perfect.” Few people probably think they have this particular distortion, since in the abstract, it seems so obvious. “No one is perfect, after all. I know my parents weren't perfect.” In actual practice, however, as people try to cope with the pain in their lives, many people turn to the idea of “perfect parents” or some variant of that idea as a way of protecting themselves. In one man's family, he learned quickly that expressing any disagreement or unhappiness with his parents or their decisions was not a safe thing to do. The consequences were painful in more than one way. It was much easier to take on responsibility for everything himself (“It's all my fault”), than to face the scary reality of his powerlessness, that the people in charge of his life were unfair and sometimes dangerous. Another person experienced a chronic lack of loving emotional connection with her parents, though otherwise they were good parents, providing every physical thing she could want, including a good education and family vacations. This woman had been wounded by her parents being emotionally distant from her, and struggled with nagging feelings that there was something wrong with her. Telling herself that she had great parents, and that they didn't do anything wrong, was a way of trying to tell that feeling of self-doubt to go away. “I have no reason to feel bad, therefore I don't feel bad.” She *needed* to “look away” from her parents flaws and failures in order to avoid facing her own pain.

What honoring our parents *does* mean

1. Thank God and your parents for your existence. Without them, you would not *be*. This does not necessarily mean to thank one's parents for everything they have *done* – for not only is no parent perfect, but remember that we are looking at the command to honor parents in light of the full spectrum of parents, from the wonderful to the awful. Some may have done terrible things, whether intentional or not, and for those things we do not need to be grateful! What I am referring to here is the very fact of one's existence. Without my specific parents, *I* would not exist. Even if I had been placed for adoption right after my birth, so that my conscious connection with my biological parents was almost nothing, I would still find the source of my physical life in the fact that a divine miracle of conception occurred involving my specific mother and father.¹ God chose to bring me into existence through this man and this woman. I may not like that fact, but I can't change it, and to keep my focus on wishing I could change it is to block my own healing. To complain to God that I should have been born into a different family or to different parents, or that I should never have been born at all, is really to reject myself – for if I *had* been born to different parents, *I* wouldn't exist. Some other child would have been born. At a very fundamental level, if I cannot accept that my parents are *my* parents, God's chosen way to create me, then I cannot accept myself. Dallas Willard, in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* puts it this way:

...the fifth of the Ten commandments says, "Honor your father and your mother," and then adds, "that you may enjoy a long life in the land the Lord your God gives to you" (Exod. 20:12). And Paul notes that this is "the first commandment with a promise attached to it" (Eph. 6:2).

The promise is rooted in the realities of the human soul. A long and healthy existence requires that we be grateful to God for who we are, and we cannot be thankful for who we are without being thankful for our parents, through whom our life came. They are a part of our identity, and to reject ... them is to reject ... ourselves. To reject ourselves leads to sickness, dissolution, and death, spiritual and physical. We cannot reject ourselves and love God.²

2. Cease judging your parents. Rather, recognize the human condition common to you both. While the word "judgment" is used in a number of ways in the English language, I'm referring to a specific definition here, which must be distinguished from other typical uses of the word³. Discerning or evaluating (common meanings of "judging"), or even simple disagreement are not sinful, and indeed, sometimes are essential to godly behavior. Judging (as here defined), however, is an attitude of being fundamentally better than whoever or whatever you are judging. Underlying the judgmental approach to another person is the belief that "If I had his life, I would have done better. I wouldn't have made such bad choices. I am made of better quality 'stuff' than he is." A basic problem with this attitude, however, is that we cannot know that we would have done better had we been given the life our father or mother had. Only God can see all the variables, weigh all the suffering, choices, gifts, historical circumstances, and determine a person's "score." The unvarnished truth is that we are all sinners who need to be saved by grace. The offer of God's abundant grace not only

¹ I am not intending here to demean the importance and profound significance of adoptive parents. Once the fact of physical existence is established, the shaping effect of one's parents may be divided between biological and adoptive in varied percentages, depending on many factors.

² Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998) p.338-339.

³ See our essay "Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Prayer for Emotional Healing" on the Ministry Aids page of our website for more detailed thoughts about the dynamics of judging.

frees me from the guilt of my sin, it invites me into a life of freedom from having to keep an accounting of everyone else's sin, and the unending effort of trying to extract justice from someone or something to compensate for the sins against me. We honor our parents when we see them as frail and sinful human beings, created in the image of God and dearly loved by him, and capable of both righteous and sinful choices, the same as we ourselves. We honor our parents – or anyone – when we accept them for who they are, being honest with them about places we differ with them, but not trying to change them.

3. Get your own healing, so you can truly forgive your parents. The importance of continuing to get one's own healing can hardly be overstated. Getting healed of the wounds caused by your parents is what makes the difference between fruitful and unfruitful "looking back" into one's painful memories. A legitimate concern is that searching my childhood memories for "why I am the way I am" can fall into looking for someone to blame in order to avoid taking responsibility for my life. If I look back and focus on what has been painful in my life, I can get stuck in bitterness towards those who have hurt me and never move on to healing and freedom. Part of the good news about Theophostic Ministry is that it includes being freed from bitterness and self-pity. In some cases, the person receiving ministry spontaneously releases bitterness and self-pity once Jesus heals his traumatic memories.⁴ In other cases, the person receiving ministry must release bitterness and self-pity in order to be able to receive healing from Jesus. In either case, the healing process will truly free the person from bitterness and self-pity so that he or she can move on with life. In Theophostic Ministry, *looking back is not a dead end, but rather becomes the doorway to healing, letting go, and moving on.*

Healing, then, leads to forgiveness, which truly honors our parents. To forgive our parents is to recognize that the past cannot be undone, and that healing does not come by having the ones who "owe" me give me compensation. Forgiving involves letting go or releasing a parent who wounded you from his/her responsibility to "fix" you. Having reached adulthood, we need to take responsibility for how our lives go from here. We need to seek the Lord for healing and for how to make the most of what we have been given.

Having the overall intention to forgive is a choice, an orientation of one's will. However, actualizing it in one's heart happens as each painful memory is healed. As the Lord brings His peace and calm to each memory, compassion and forgiveness for the parent who wounded you often happens naturally⁵ (if you "release" them with a "Good riddance" and "I wouldn't take anything from you anyhow" you still need to work on releasing your judgments! Also, this probably means there are still unhealed wounds to attend to).

4. Own up to your sins against your parents. Confess to God and receive His forgiveness, and if possible, apologize to your parents. Children aren't perfect any more than parents are! There is a great difference in responsibility when parents are adults and children are young. But eventually, the free will choices of the child also impacts the relationship, either positively or negatively. Part of honoring our parents is not sinning against them, and when we do, taking responsibility appropriately.

It is important to remember that the parents' sins and the child's sins are two separate

⁴ "Healing traumatic memories" includes Jesus speaking truth to replace the lies associated with the traumatic memories, removing truth-based pain associated with the traumatic memories, forgiving sin associated with the traumatic memories, and removing demonic spirits infecting the traumatic memories.

⁵ See our essay "Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Prayer for Emotional Healing" on the Ministry Aids page of our website for more detailed thoughts about forgiveness, as well as references to Dr Ed Smith's comments on the subject.

transactions. In other words, my parents sins against me don't cancel out my sins against them or visa versa. A common deception people hold is something like this: "Well, I wasn't always the best son, either, so 'Judge not that ye be not judged,' Right?" Or a similar one, "I'm not a perfect parent myself, either, so..." While not judging is important, as already described, that's usually not what people really mean by this kind of statement. What people mean by this is that since they sinned against their parents, they have no right to recognize or feel pain about their parent's sins against them. Unfortunately, this kind of "accounting" doesn't produce healing or forgiveness for anyone. Jesus would not have had to go to the cross if we could erase our sins by making sure we suffered an equivalent amount from someone else's sin against us. We need to acknowledge and consciously feel the impact of our parents sins against us in order to be healed of their effects (the lies we took in), and in order to truly forgive them. We need to acknowledge and own the impact of our sins against our parents in order to receive a true heart of repentance, to know we are forgiven by God, and in order to sincerely apologize to our parents.

5. Hope and pray for the best for your parents, which means so much more than a nice house, frequent vacations, or a comfortable retirement. It means praying that they would know the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, in the places of their deepest pain. It means praying that they would be reconciled where broken relationships have occurred, and that the Holy Spirit would convict them of sin if they are blindly or willfully persisting in it. *It also means blessing them in ways that don't compromise your own integrity or relationship with the Lord.*

In essence, to honor one's parents means to accept their place in your identity, and to love them with the love of Christ. Bear in mind that Jesus tells us to love even our enemies, so if your parents were evil and are therefore appropriately put in the category of your enemies, they are still within the "love" command. It may *not* be a good idea to associate with your parents in some ways; if they are given to rages or sexually inappropriate behavior, for instance, one would not be wise to let them babysit the grandkids. Even regarding the great majority of parents, however, who loved their children and did much good nurturing, providing, teaching, and sharing joy, the truest honoring still involves a gradual sorting out of both the good and the bad of our emotional inheritance. If we are unwilling to really acknowledge and consciously feel the pain of wounds caused by our parents, we won't get healed of those wounds. And ironically, that lack of healing will hinder our ability to have the best possible relationships with our parents in the present. Subtle (or blatant) judgments and bitterness will linger in unattended wounds, and will find their way into how we relate to our parents (and our children, and our spouses, and our neighbors, etc.). Wounds of other types will affect our lives in various ways, robbing us of the time, energy, and resources that we could be spending on our children, friends, or our parents. Emotional intimacy will be blocked by the need to put on an "everything's fine" mask that we really don't feel.

Rightly understanding the meaning of the command to honor one's parents will bless both parents and children. Children are blessed because they are freed to get their healing of any wounds inflicted by their parents, and to live as responsible adults before God, not in bondage to their bitterness and unforgiveness of their parents. They are also blessed because their healing will free them to receive all that *is* good from their parents, in the past and the present. It is not uncommon for people to say that after they experience healing for the bad times of their childhood, they begin to remember and appreciate whatever good times there were. In the present, an adult child who rightly understands honoring will be able to enjoy as good a relationship with her parent as the parent will allow. A parent may have changed for the better since one was young;

honoring the parent as described here, the adult child will grow to accept and celebrate those positive changes, rather than resentfully feeling “It’s about time,” or “Day late and a dollar short,” and continuing to try to punish the parent for not being different earlier.

Parents will be blessed by their children’s honoring them in this way. Though they may not, at first (or ever!), think it’s a blessing, parents will be blessed by their children’s ceasing to enable their dysfunctional patterns and sins. The more healed the child gets, the less tangled the relationship with the parent becomes, and whatever lie-driven behaviors the parent has will become more obvious. There is something profoundly and productively confrontive to being with someone who is loving, non-judging, and thoroughly honest. The parent is more likely to pursue his or her own healing when dealing with children who “confront” them in that way. Parents who really want it will be given another chance to build a mutually-fulfilling relationship with their children, even if their own woundedness and sin meant that they messed things up to a greater or lesser extent when their children were young. Parents will certainly be blessed by a child who takes responsibility for his own sins against them and apologizes. The more healed child will also be more able and likely to give truly honest and heartfelt expressions of appreciation and blessing to the parent. All of the dimensions of honoring listed here help to open the way for the parent and child to have a true friendship.