

## **Honor Your Parents**

### **By David Feddes**

*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)*

Once upon a time there was a little old man. His eyes blinked and his hands trembled; when he ate he clattered the silverware, missed his mouth with the spoon as often as not, and dribbled a bit of his food on the tablecloth. Now he lived with his married son, having nowhere else to live, and his son's wife was a modern young woman who knew that in-laws should not be tolerated in a woman's house.

"I can't have this," she said. "It interferes with a woman's right to happiness."

So she and her husband took the little old man gently but firmly by the arm and led him to the corner of the kitchen. There they set him on a stool and gave him his food, what there was of it, in an earthenware bowl. From then on he always ate in the corner, blinking at the table with wistful eyes.

One day his hand trembled more than usual, and the earthenware bowl fell and broke.

"If you are a pig," said the daughter-in-law, "you must eat out of a trough." So they made him a little wooden trough, and he got his meals in that.

These people had a four-year-old son of whom they were very fond. One suppertime, the young man noticed his boy playing intently with some bits of wood and asked what he was doing.

"I'm making a trough," he said, smiling up for approval, "to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big."

The man and his wife looked at each other for a while and didn't say anything. Then they cried a little. Then they went to the corner and took the little old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him on a comfortable chair and gave him his food on a plate, and from then on nobody ever scolded when he clattered or spilled or broke things.

That's one of Grimm's fairy tales, as retold by Joy Davidman. It's a not-very-subtle way of saying: honor your parents, or your children will dishonor you. That's much the same point as God makes in the fifth of the Ten Commandments. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12).

### **Generation Gap**

The way adult children treat elderly parents is one part of this, the final phase of the relationship, but it all begins when you're a little child. At that point, you're dependent on your parents for almost everything, and you're under whatever authority they bring to bear on you. Then, as you grow and become a teenager, you become more independent. Even if you're still dependent on your parents for food and clothes and a roof over your head, you become a lot less dependent on them in the way you think. Your attitude toward their authority often goes through an enormous change. A four-year-old tends to think mom and dad are always right, but if you're a fourteen-year-old, you're more likely to think your parents are always wrong.

Those teenage years can be a tough time for kids to relate to their parents, and it's often tough on parents as well. Do you know the advice Mark Twain once gave to parents? "When a child turns 13, put him in a barrel, nail down the lid, and feed him through a knothole. When he turns 16, plug the knothole." Okay, so the relationship between teens and parents isn't quite that bad—but sometimes it's close!

The relationship between children and parents has never been problem-free, but our society makes it even tougher because there is such a strong emphasis on the individual and far less on family bonds. In a cross-cultural survey, people in different countries were asked to complete the sentence, "I love my mother but ..." –how would you finish that sentence? In Western countries, most took this as a cue to offer some criticism of their mother. In South-East Asia, most people filled in the blank very differently. The answer was usually something along the line of "I love my mother but... I can never repay all that she has done for me."

Let's take a hard look at why honoring our parents is so important and so difficult, especially in our society. What's happening when teenagers feel more drawn to MTV than to their parents' ideas? What's going on when senior citizens in good health would rather live near a golf course in the Sun Belt than be near their children and grandchildren? And what about inconvenient seniors in failing health who are given, not a trough in a corner, but an assigned spot in a nursing home? We need to think about why the generation gap often seems so wide, and what it will take to bridge the gap.

### **Serious Commandment**

Before we get into that any further, though, I want to say something right up front. In the Ten Commandments, the command to honor our parents is the fifth commandment, not the first. The first four commandments deal with how we ought to honor God. God comes first. Children honor their parents most truly, and parents most deserve that honor, when the whole family seeks to honor God together. Family experts often talk about quality time. Well, there's no better "quality time" than when a family takes time to be together with each other and with God. That's quality time.

Jesus said the whole law could be summarized in two basic principles: love God above all, and love your neighbor as yourself. In the Ten Commandments, the first four deal with loving God, and the remaining six deal with loving our neighbor. The fifth commandment, then, is the first one that deals directly with our relationship to others. Respect for others and love for others begins at home.

The fifth commandment plainly says that our attitude toward our parents has a powerful impact on our future. If children honor their parents, and if parents act in a way that deserves such honor, the future is bright. On the other hand, if children "diss" their parents, if they disrespect and dishonor them, the future is bleak.

To see how serious all of this is, consider this: In the earliest days of God's people, the Israelites, God commanded the death penalty for rebellious children. At that point in their history, the Israelites were a motley, chaotic bunch of former slaves. They could never become a great civilization, with healthy families, strong communities, and a thriving faith, if rejection of parental authority became widespread. Dishonor of parents was a cancer, deadly for the whole community, and it had to be cut away.

Now, this didn't mean that a five-year-old could be killed the moment he did something his parents told him not to. The law applied to a defiant delinquent of more responsible age, someone who was incorrigible, a habitual drunkard or troublemaker,

who despised his parents and refused all their advice and warnings. And even in a situation like that, the parents had no authority simply to kill their own child, as in many other cultures of that time. The death penalty could be imposed only after a hearing by the governing authorities of the whole community (see Deuteronomy 21:12-21). Still, it was a hard law for a hard situation. We live at a later stage of God's revelation, but the harshness of this penalty from an earlier stage shows just how serious it is to despise and dishonor our parents.

### **Affirming Authority**

With that as background, let's consider what the command to honor our parents means for us in our current situation.

First of all, this command affirms authority. The command is to honor. Honor is not an especially sentimental word. Honor is a word that has to do with recognizing authority. Love and affection are very important in the home, of course, but there is also to be a definite structure of authority.

Authority isn't very popular these days, however. Since the 1960's, especially, it's been thought almost a moral obligation to question authority, not to honor it. Whether it's government, church, or parents, we tend to resent authority, and to think that the only opinion that really matters is our own. In certain times and cultures, people may have been too quick to knuckle under to authority, even when authority figures were dreadfully wrong, but that's hardly our problem. These days, the situation is more like what someone described this way: "In our school system, the teachers are afraid of the principal, the principal is afraid of the school board, the school board is afraid of the parents, the parents are afraid of the kids, and the kids aren't afraid of anybody."

That may be an exaggeration, but regard for authority is at an all time low, and many people think that's the way it should be. Parents and teachers often feel unfit to exercise authority over children. The modern way has been to view children as basically good and noble. The parents' job is to be as permissive and affirming as possible and not to impose anything on their children. Likewise, school teachers are to enhance children's self-esteem and assist children in clarifying their own values without imposing anything on them.

But when this happens, parents and teachers are abandoning their rightful authority. They ought to be giving authoritative moral guidance to children. Kids need to know that their instincts aren't always good, that many of their desires are destructive and many of their values are selfish and immoral. Among other things, authority means saying, "I know more about right living than you do. So I am going to teach you, and I expect you to listen." The fifth commandment expects parents to exercise their proper authority. God wouldn't command children to honor their parents if he hadn't given parents authority in the first place.

When parents lose their nerve and abandon their authority, or when kids reject the authority of good parents, what happens? Are the children then free from all authority? Not at all. They just submit to different authorities.

### **Competing Authorities**

If you're a teenager, and you stop trying to please your parents, does that mean you're now strong and independent and making your own choices? Not quite. Often it just means you're more eager to please your peers than your parents. You want to fit

the standards of your age group and your friends. You want to buy their kind of shoes, wear their kind of clothes, have their hairstyle and earrings and whatever else fits the "look" of kids your age. You want to use their words, listen to their kind of music, and do the kind of things the kids around you are doing.

Sometimes this is fairly harmless, but at other times it can lead to serious damage. When somebody offers you a cigarette or a "forty" of liquor or a joint of marijuana or a snort of crack, do you think they have your well-being in mind? But it's tempting to go along if that's what it takes to fit in. If the kids in your school or neighborhood talk like there's something wrong with you if you're still a virgin or if your date is putting pressure on you to go all the way, is it because they're concerned about your future happiness? But it's hard not to go along unless you have parents who taught you to know better.

And you know the really sick joke in all this? Just when you think you're doing what you and your friends want instead of what adults want, just when you think your generation is showing that it's really free from the control of grownups, the fact is that you're doing the will of certain adults who hide behind the scenes and know how to pull your strings like a puppet. Behind most of the fads in clothes, shoes, hairstyles, and so forth, are shrewd marketers who target each new generation. They try to widen the generation gap so that kids will do what adult peddlers want instead of what adult parents want.

Take MTV. It's a channel owned and managed by adults. Its main purpose is to make money for adults who own stock in the huge corporation that has MTV as one of its many holdings. Before MTV got off the ground, a bunch of researchers planned very carefully how they could hook kids, get ratings, and sell lots of records and other stuff. MTV executives call it "the most researched channel in history." MTV studied what kids are like, not for the purpose of helping them become better and happier, but simply to manipulate the kids into buying what companies are selling. Bob Pittman, one of the main forces behind the scenes, said, "At MTV, we don't shoot for the 14-year-olds—we own them."

Much of the youth culture these days is actually ruled by adults whose only interest in the youth is exploiting them and using them to make money. For every group of kids drooling over a pornographic magazine, there's a sleazy adult millionaire like Hugh Hefner or Bob Guccione chuckling all the way to the bank. For every movie or TV show that shows a steamy sex scene and gives kids the feeling that this is what love is all about, there's a Hollywood studio and a corporate sponsor who are counting their millions, even as teens get pregnant, catch diseases, and lose all respect for sex, love, and marriage.

For every kid that smokes a cigarette because other kids think it's cool, there's an advertising executive and a tobacco company gloating over the millions that Joe Camel is generating in the youth market. For every kid that takes drugs or booze from another kid, there's an adult drug dealer or an adult brewing company executive who just got richer. For every kid buying the albums of a messed up singer like Kurt Cobain or Madonna or Axl Rose or Michael Jackson, there's a record company executive somewhere lining his pockets.

These adults are in the game of making money off kids, and they know what buttons to push. They know that rebellion, anger, sex, violence, and peer pressure have an especially powerful pull for confused teenagers, and these adults skillfully manipulate

these things to make money. Meanwhile, parents who simply want to help kids get past these problems and obsessions and grow to maturity seem to be out of touch.

If you're a teenager, you need to know what's happening here. The question isn't whether you follow the lead of adults. The real question is, which adults? The ones who put a dollar value on your soul, or the ones who gave you birth and love you and want to help you become wise and strong and good? Honor your father and your mother, and you'll be much more able to resist manipulators.

And as for you parents: Don't run from your calling to exercise authority. Don't be afraid to impress your convictions on your children. If you don't want to influence your kids, you're about the only one who doesn't. Drug dealers, pornographers, record companies, cigarette sellers, breweries, Hollywood producers—they're doing all in their power to influence your kids. Surely, you can do better than that crowd.

### **Respecting Elders**

In an age that is so negative about authority, the fifth commandment calls us to honor authority. What's more, in an age that glorifies youth and despises old age, the fifth commandment calls us to respect our elders. When your motto is "don't trust anybody over 30," what do you do when you turn 30? One problem when we don't respect older people is that we never really grow up ourselves. More and more people get stuck in perpetual adolescence. They're in their thirties or forties, and they're still afraid of responsibility, they still prefer sexual experimentation to lifelong commitment, and they spend a ridiculous amount of money and effort trying not to look their age, getting facelifts, liposuction, hair dyes, and all the rest.

In contrast to all this, the Bible says, "Gray hair is a crown of splendor" (Proverbs 16:31). There's something splendid about old age. Being young has certain advantages, but so does being old. In God's design, there's something special about each phase of life. Kids have enormous energy and enthusiasm, while older people have great experience and wisdom. The Bible says, "The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old" (Proverbs 20:29).

Part of honoring our parents is recognizing the wisdom that comes with age. Mark Twain once described his own teenage years and his attitude toward his father this way: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have him around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

A lot of us can identify with that. When we go through those years of developing our own identity, when we're first learning to really think for ourselves, we may think our parents are really out of it, that they just don't get it, that they are downright ignorant. But once we've made it through that stage, there's often a renewed respect for our parents' wisdom.

In saying all this, I'm not trying to claim that all parents are perfect, or that getting older automatically makes you wiser. There are abusive and incompetent parents, and there are people who, instead of getting older and wiser, just get older. When God calls us to honor parents and aged people, he also calls parents and grandparents to be the kind of people who deserve that kind of honor. In Ephesians 6 the Bible says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right," and then it adds, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1,4).

## **Bridging the Generation Gap**

Where a generation gap exists, where children and parents are distant from each other, both need to be reconciled to the Lord and to his will for them. Then they can be reconciled to each other. The fifth commandment shows us that people committed to God will also be committed to their family.

Too often our own individual desires come first, and family comes in a distant second. When that happens, the generation gap becomes a huge canyon. If grandparents prefer a golf course in the sun to the company of their children and grandchildren, they shouldn't be too shocked if they eventually find themselves in a nursing home where they seldom see their children or grandchildren. I'm not saying seniors should never enjoy themselves in a warmer climate, nor am I saying that it's always evil for an elderly person in need of special care to be in a nursing home. But I am saying that too often family ties are viewed more as a burden than a blessing. We need to put relationships before personal pleasure and convenience. We need to ask how we can best love our dear ones before we ask how we can enjoy ourselves. Only mutual love and honor can bridge the generation gap.

Where these bonds of love and honor exist, based on a common faith in Jesus Christ, family members can support each other, and each generation can be proud of the other. Proverbs 17:6 puts it this way: "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children." Let's pray that God will make that more and more a reality for us.

*Originally prepared by David Feddes for Back to God Ministries International. Used with permission.*