

Relating to Parents

Key Text: Ephesians 6:1-3

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Introduction

How do you relate to your parents? Or, better, how *should* you? As young adults, this can often be a murky question. As difficult as it may be to answer, it's an incredibly important question. Perhaps you still live at home and are trying to figure out exactly how to relate to your parents as you're becoming an adult. Or maybe you've moved away and onto campus. Or perhaps you go back home and face the hard reality that your parents don't quite see how independent you've become. They still treat you like child in certain ways. Or maybe that season has passed for you, and now you wonder what obligations you have toward your parents now that you're grown and supporting yourself. How much should you obey them now that you're an adult, out of the house, etc.? In this article, we'll talk through some of these issues as we learn from Paul in his very straightforward instructions to the children of Ephesus.

In this wider paragraph, Paul gives directives to wives and husbands, children and fathers and even slaves and masters. You can think of all these instructions in Ephesians 5:22-6:10 as “household instructions” because all these groups of folks would've made up the household in the Greco-Roman period. Wives and husbands are obvious. Children and parents are also obvious. But even that last group, slaves and masters, would also be part of the ancient “household.”

If we were to pan even further back, we would recognize that all these instructions have a context. For the last few chapters, Paul's been helping us understand that we believers are radically different now than we used to be. We who were once dead have been made alive by God's mighty power (ch. 2). We have been recreated into the image of Christ (ch. 4). Now God wants us to learn to imitate our Lord as we learn to live like him in the world. We are the people who will inherit the new creation, so we should live like it.

In this paragraph, Paul's helping us see that our redemption in Christ has direct implications for how we interact with our parents. We often don't recognize how concerned Christ is that we learn to relate to our parents (the parents he's sovereignly given us) in a way that pleases him. He wants you to see that he cares about your attitudes, your outbursts, and even your eye rolls in the home. He wants to teach you that there is great opportunity to bring him glory, and great opportunity for eternal reward in how you relate to your parents, as we'll see below.

So how should you relate to them? In this passage, Eph. 6:1-3, Paul's going to tell you. Paul gives us two, closely related, instructions. And, in each of these instructions, Paul also provides corresponding motivations. This is very typical of Paul, and we'll key on both tonight. So, let's look at his first instruction to the kids.

Instruction #1: Parental Obedience (6:1)

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

There's instruction and motivation here in this verse. Let's look at each.

The Instruction: Obey by Faith (6:1a)

One of our first curiosities as we hit this text, especially if you're ready to be out from under the authority of your parents, is: what's the age limit of these "children" Paul's talking about here? In other words, when do these commands stop applying to me?! Well, we're not given any definite ages here in the term, but we do have a few clues.

Notice that the children are told to obey "in the Lord." This is Paul's shorthand way of referring to them as Christians. He's calling them to obey in light of their faith in Christ, as part of their Christian discipleship. We'll talk more about this in a second, but I think this implies that the kids that Paul's envisioning here are old enough to understand the basics of trusting Christ.

Yet, also notice down in v. 4, that the parents, with the father leading the way, are to "nurture them" or "raise them" with discipline and instruction. So, the "nurture" word group seems to imply they are still dependent in certain ways on the care and support of their parents. So, probably 3-4 until they are old enough to support themselves (that's totally a Mackie guesstimate). So, I'd just call this "dependent" children.

Many of you are in what we call the "tweener" period. You may be an adult legally, but you're dependent in various ways. You still live at home under your parents' house. Or, you live on campus, but your parents are helping pay your way, and wouldn't be able to do it without their support. If there's still a dependency there, then it's safe to say there's an obligation for you to seek to obey your parents when your desires collide. We'll nuance this in a bit.

But before we get wrapped up around the axle here, I want you to make another observation. This obedience Paul's calling for is an act of faith. He's telling children to "obey...in the Lord." This means it is part of your discipleship with Christ, ultimately. How so? Well, you realize that Christ has ordained your parental set up, with all their blessings and weaknesses. You might wish they were less "hovery," or gave you more freedom, or took more interest in your discipleship, but your parents are ordained by Christ, and he calls you to trust him as you seek to obey them. That's what it means to "obey...in the Lord."

And you better believe that obedience takes faith. It takes faith to wrestle your will to the ground, to follow something your parents think is best when you prefer another option. It's hard, and it only gets easier to justify the more like an "adult" you think you are. But, we've got to let this cut against our pride. And in all this, we've got to see Christ standing behind them and beckoning you to ultimately trust him as you resign your will and obey, while you're under their authority. He sees that humility and promises to reward you.

The Motivation: Appropriateness (6:1b)

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Now, Paul is passionate about this, because he knows it's "right," meaning it's appropriate for children to obey their parents. Calling children to obey is not oppressive; it's the *way it should be* according to God's design. It implies that children will actually flourish as result. That's the motivation he gives to obey this initial instruction (6:1b).

We all know there's something really wrong when the child is allowed to control and manipulate the parent. We know it shouldn't be that way. The fact that we even tolerate this at all in our culture shows us how far off we've drifted from the truth. I read a short article today on "child directed parenting" where we're told to "respect our toddlers' choices," avoid "authoritarian commands" like "no" and...I kid you not... "ignore negative behaviors and use praise, reflection, reporting and imitation to positively influence your child's behavior."¹ That ain't right, guys. It perverts God's design and is absolutely *devastating to the child*.

Think about this. In the Old Testament, a child's violent behavior toward his parents was punishable by death (Ex. 21:15). And Proverbs warns: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures" (30:17). In Romans, Paul says that people who are "disobedient to parents" are in the same category as those who are "gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, and inventors of evil" (Rom. 1:30). In God's eyes, it's not right for children to rebel.

As hard as it is to hear, it's helpful. It's helpful because it humbles us out of the gate to realize that our disobedience, our refusal to heed what our parents say because we think we know better, reveals that we're operating outside God's created order. We're stoking pride. And, if we're not careful, we are inviting his rebuke. It's motivating to know that obedience is right, that it's appropriate, and that God will hold us accountable for it.

So, I know this is fun, but let's move on. Paul's got one more instruction for us. It's similar to the first but with a different nuance.

¹ <http://www.drjoebarber.com/newsletters/child-directed-parenting/>

Instruction #2: Parental Honor (6:2-3)

² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Like what we saw above, Paul again gives an instruction and couples it with an incredibly powerful motivation. Let’s, first, look at the instruction.

The Instruction: Honor (6:2)

As you can see, the instruction in verse two is for children to honor their parents. But what’s interesting about it is that Paul is actually quoting from the OT. He’s showing us how it’s always been “right” or even “lawful” for children to do this by appealing to Ex. 20:12. Since ancient days, God has always called covenant children to honor their parents.

Let’s take a moment and think through what it means to honor someone. Is it any different than obedience? I’d say, contextually, there’s not very much difference between the two for the dependent child. In other words, to honor is to obey, and to obey is to show honor. But the word itself has a slight nuance of difference. It means that we revere someone, or hold in awe or esteem, or we place a high value upon them. It gets at the attitude, or our disposition, in a way that simply commanding obedience doesn’t. It’s very similar to the idea of fearing someone, as in respecting them (cf. 5:33, where wives are told to fear their husbands and 6:5, where slaves are told to obey their masters with fear and trembling).

And remember, this reverential honor that Paul is commanding here for our parents flows out of our reverence for Christ, our fear of Christ (5:21). How so? We realize that Christ, our King, has ordered this world with various authorities, and we believe that the order is good. It’s good *because* Christ appointed it. And in the home, the authority is the parents in general, and the father in particular. Children are called here to recognize this.

This is incredibly helpful, especially if certain parents are not inherently respectable or worthy of honor in themselves. Perhaps they are hypocritical, or they have unrepentant sin, or have failed to provide and take care of the family. In those situations, it’s difficult for the child to show honor, and understandably so. Paul will even go on to say in verse four that dads can *provoke* their children to anger by this kind of unfaithfulness. But, if you recognize that the position itself is honorable, *even if the officeholder isn’t*, you as a child can still show honor for Christ’s sake. We can “salute the uniform”² even if it doesn’t fit the one who is wearing it.

And we’ve all got to be on guard for dishonorable behavior, don’t we? We roll our eyes in contempt, we lash out when we feel slighted, we clam up if we’re misunderstood. We’re

² Lou Priolo, *Keeping Your Cool: A Teen’s Survival Guide* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2014), 157.

tempted to write off their correction, or not listen when they're talking to us, or even walk away mid-conversation.

Instead, we want to be cultivating humble and honoring kinds of attitudes toward them, that flow out in honoring action. We want to seek to understand them, express thanks to God for them, consider their counsel, heed their rebukes. We want to be part of the solution for problems, and initiate in acts of love toward them.

Paul doesn't stop here, but he continues with some serious motivation.

The Motivation: Future Inheritance (6:3)

² "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

Options of what this means. Some people say this is more of a principle: that if you obey and honor your parents, things will generally go well for you, and you'll live a longer life. There are exceptions, but on the whole you'll have a better chance at success in life. And I think that's a generally true principle. At least your parents won't be as tempted to kill you for your disobedience. But I think Paul is saying much more than that here, in how he's using this text in its context. But before we unpack that, let's look a little closer at what Paul's actually quoting from.

First, let's check out the original context of this quote (Ex. 20:12):

- Blessing and long life in the land of Canaan is promised to Israelite children as a reward for honoring their parents (Ex. 20:12). And remember, to honor parents is part of the covenant stipulations (summarized in the 10 Commandments) that God gave to Israel. Meaning, that obeying parents is part of being faithful covenant partners. As their reward, they would inherit blessing and long life in the land.
- And it's not just a reward for the children who obey their parents. These same promises of long life in the land and blessing are given to the entire nation...if they are faithful to the covenant (Deut. 4:40; 5:33; et. al.). The land and life in it is part of Israel's promised inheritance as God's sons (see Ps. 105:11; 135:12; 136:21, 22).
- But what's really interesting is that the promises don't stop with just the land of Israel. As Israel is faithful, not only will they inherit Canaan and live long in it, but they will also be exalted above the other nations and "possess the gate of their enemies" (Gen. 22:17; cf. 24:60; Num. 24:15-19; Ps. 2; Dan. 7). In other words, Israel is promised a universal rule—worldwide dominion—if they are faithful. This is why Paul says Abraham wasn't promised Canaan *only*, but that he and his offspring would be heirs of the entire world (Rom. 4:13). This is very, very important to note.

- So...after Israel enters the land and gets settled in, what happens? Are they faithful to the covenant? Nope. Israel and her kings were *unfaithful* to the covenant. They didn't keep it, and as a result, were exiled from the land many years later, as we would expect.
- But God promised and sent a Messiah who would represent Israel in obedience, and die for her disobedience, thus securing the fulfillment of all the (new) covenant blessings, *including the land*. Isaiah says the Messiah will establish the land to apportion the desolate heritages (Isa. 49:8), meaning he will renew and rebuild the inheritance that was made desolate by the exile. Isaiah goes on to say this King is bringing about the new creation (65:17), the final restoration of the curse of Genesis 3. And in this new creation, the renewed land, the offspring of Israel will live forever (Isa. 66:22).
- This is why Jesus can promise his followers that they will inherit the renewed earth (Matt. 5:5), and why John describes believers as reigning with Christ upon the renewed earth, and not just the land of Israel (Rev. 5:10). This is the promised future inheritance that awaits us as believers. It will include the land of Israel, but will go beyond it, to the entire earth.

Now, you might be wondering where all this is going at this point. Look back at our text. Paul promises to believing children, members of the new covenant, that it will go well with them and they will live long on the earth. Is Paul promising that you'll just live a longer life now if you obey your parents? I think Paul is using this language to refer to life in the new creation, life in the future, renewed land we will inherit. And I think this, because he's already talked to us about our inheritance in this letter.

- 1:11 – In Christ we've obtained an inheritance (1:11).
- 1:13-14 – The Spirit, who presently dwells with us, guarantees that we will receive this promised inheritance (1:13-14). This means our inheritance is future. We've only received the very first installment, which is the Spirit. We are awaiting the rest.
- But we are Gentiles, right? Didn't God make all those land promises to Abraham and the Jews? Aren't they the covenant people? Yes—but guess what? In the Messiah, God has joined us together with believing Jews, remember?
- Paul says we were once “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise” (2:12) but that we have now been “brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13) and made us into one people with believing Jews (2:14-16).
- As a result of this incredible work by the Messiah, Paul says that we Gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints” (2:19), the believing Jews, and...get this... “fellow heirs” and “fellow partakers of the promise” (3:6), meaning we believing Gentiles will share in it; we will inherit the same things originally promised to them: i.e. the world! That's because we are people of the new creation (2:10; 4:24).

So, even in this very letter, Paul has told us that we Gentiles will share in inheriting the renewed land, the new creation. And here in our text, he is promising this as the reward of children who obey their parents. They will live long, live eternally, upon the earth.

But this raises another question. You may be thinking: “Wait, didn’t the Messiah earn this blessing for us? How is it then a reward for us who obey our parents?” You can think of it this way: your obedience to your parents proves that you have the Spirit, and that he is actually starting to “fill” or control your life (5:18). It’s the proof that the Holy Spirit has really been given to you. He has made you sensitive to honor them, when before you didn’t really care. Now you seek to obey them. Imperfectly? Oh yeah, but it’s on your radar. It’s now a deep desire for you, when it wasn’t before. Now, you *want* to do it. When you fail, you confess and repent to them. That’s evidence of the Spirit. And the Spirit is the guarantee of your inheritance, remember (1:14)? In other words, when we are growing in honoring our parents for Christ’s sake by faith, it demonstrates and assures us that we are part of those who will inherit the new earth.

Think about that, guys! When you obey your parents, even when you have to wrestle your will to the ground, even when they don’t deserve to be honored, do you see what is happening? You’re putting God’s incredible glory on display! You are demonstrating the radical power of the Spirit. And you are revealing that you are a son or daughter of glory, a son or daughter who will inherit everything you see. Paul wants you to have this vision folks, this motivation, to get back at it, to seek humility with your parents, to seek honoring them.

As we wrap up this study, there’s a lot we *didn’t* say that we *could’ve* said about how to relate to your parents. Let me take a few pages and provide a few final nuances in this area that are particularly relevant to those who are straddling the fence between adolescence and adulthood.

Final Nuances

1. Don’t sin in order to “obey” or please your parents (Matt. 10:37).

Obviously, the Lord takes precedent over your parents, and obedience to him takes priority. You’re not to sin, even if your parents command you to. Thankfully you are part of a healthy church and can make appeals to church leadership, and, if necessary, to the state. I’m thinking of things like abuse situations where the parents want to cover it up and command their children to lie about it, which sadly happens.

More often, though, you’ll encounter situations in your family where you aren’t able to participate. You’ll know you need to excuse yourself, say from watching a movie that has things displeasing to Christ in it, but you’ll feel the pressure from your family not to ruin family night. That’s when you’ve got to be gracious, but obey Christ rather than what your family wants from you. He takes priority even over family relationships.

2. Don’t think you automatically deserve freedom from your parents when you cross some artificial threshold.

I hear this a lot: “But Clay, my parents are so _____. They treat me like a child when I go back home. They don’t realize I’m an adult now that I’ve gone to college. There’s so much clashing when I go back home. It’s so hard to honor them when they don’t treat me like an adult!”

But ask yourself this very difficult question: Are you actually acting more like a child or an adult? Examine your own heart and life before you accuse your parents of trying to micromanage you. Freedom comes from consistent faithfulness, wisdom, and integrity. Many young people I’ve talked to think that they deserve freedom and trust from their parents simply because they turn a certain age (like it’s a right). But they’re still acting a lot like children, and they haven’t earned much credibility with their parents. Or they think one wise decision after about 10 unwise decisions is evidence enough.

Instead of self-pitying in pride, work hard at setting an example to them of your faithfulness. Complete your assignments. Go to bed and wake up on time. Get your laundry done. Get a job and be faithful at it. Get good grades. Treat them with respect. Follow through with your commitments. Be proactive in the family and actually help out without being asked. If you honestly don’t know what to do, ask your parents how you could grow in faithfulness. If you get after it here, more times than not, parents start giving more leash.

3. Learn to make humble appeals with grace.

Inevitably, disagreements happen, especially as you grow into adulthood. You begin to think differently than your parents, and sometimes you may even have a legitimate point. So you need to learn to make *humble appeals* (not demands) with grace. How do you do that? Humbly acknowledge what it is your parents desire from you. “We don’t want you to go on that trip with your friends. We don’t think it’s good for guys and girls to do overnight things together.” But you had your heart set on this trip. And your parents don’t even realize what kind of trip it is! You’re tempted to respond sinfully in the flesh in that moment, and accuse them or make some kind of demand. Instead, exercise self-control and make an appeal.

Ask them something like this: “Hey, Dad and Mom, I realize you think this trip is not a good idea and you don’t want me to go. I’m planning to obey you. But could I make an appeal to you to reconsider? I’m not quite sure you have all the information.” If your parent doesn’t want to reconsider, then you obey your parent.

But typically, your parents are far more reasonable than you give them credit for, and they’ll likely be softened (and surprised!) by a humble appeal like that. If they agree to hear you out, humbly give your additional data or reasoning. “The reason I want to go on the trip is because it’s the Boundless Retreat with our church. The guys and girls are staying in separate buildings and there are lots of leaders going. We want to hear the word and grow together. If you have any questions, I’m sure you could contact Pastor Clay and he’d give you all the details.” This new data may cause your folks to reconsider.

Allow them to take time and reconsider, and then obey whatever your parents decide. Don't try to manipulate them to get your way (sulking, blowing up, giving them the silent treatment, yelling, etc.). Trust the Lord, who ultimately controls your parents. He knows what is best for you, and will lavishly reward you for your obedience.

4. Don't remain passive about unhealthy or unhelpful family situations.

Sadly, many of the young folks I counsel come from a range of difficult family situations. In situations of abuse, please make that known so we can make sure you're safe, get you the adequate help you need, and help you walk wisely through that.

When situations are difficult, we first want to work on our perspectives. See this as a way the Lord is sanctifying you and learn to rejoice, not in the difficulty of the situation, but in the growth he's producing (see James 1:2-4). Fighting for this perspective in an unhealthy family dynamic is not easy, but it's absolutely vital for you. Get with an older saint or one of the pastors and ask them for help in getting your perspective straight and helping you get a plan of action. You may need to graciously confront, or repent of bitterness and resentment and anger. You'll likely need to forgive and even reconcile if that's possible.

Then, in tandem with working on your perspective, seek to set yourself up to be independent of them. What I mean is get yourself in a position where you're not dependent on them for nourishment. Get a job. Move out with some people. Be wise in it. Don't take out all kinds of loans because you just can't stand living there with them anymore. That's why you have to see the Lord's working in it, so you don't make a faithless decision out of anger and discontentment. But a contented person can still work proactively to better their situation, and typically, this is what we advise.

5. As you're growing in Christ, don't think it's exclusively on you to change your parents.

It's so easy to go to college, and especially if you get plugged in here, to start growing in the Lord and in discernment. Then, as your mind is renewed, as you're being disciplined, you begin to see issues with your family, or the way you grew up, or things that aren't good about your home church. Then young people take it upon themselves to try to go in and totally change their parents, or they begin resenting them, or they are ashamed of them.

But those would be wrong responses. You've got to remember that God placed you in your family, and even if it isn't ideal, he has supplied so much mercy to you. The only reason you're growing is because he's opening your mind and heart. So we want to have that same humility as we come back to our families and home churches, if they aren't on the same page as us.

But what do you do if you're starting to see that you're believing something different than your parents?

6. Take opportunities the Lord provides to prayerfully influence your family.

Go in and share what you are learning with them, and particularly how it's transforming your life and how the Lord is producing fruit. Say something like, "Mom, I know I've been away this semester, and the Lord is teaching me so much in his word. I'd love to bring you guys into what I've been learning. It's really helped me, and I'd love to get your thoughts, too."

As differences rise to the surface and become evident, instead of getting defensive or argumentative, ask them why they think the way they do about it. Seek to genuinely understand their point of view and affirm as much as you can. Then ask them how they think through Scriptures that seem to go a different direction. "Yeah, Mom, I used to think like that, too. It makes sense. But then my pastor preached this text, and it really made me think twice. What do you think about this verse?" Again, seek to understand. Be patient, because they may have never thought about the Scripture you're bringing up, and it may be a little embarrassing to them, especially if it obviously contradicts their opinion. So go slow, and be gentle, always pointing out how you're learning, too. But always move into disagreements with an open Bible, not just spouting your opinions without Scripture to support them. That way, you reveal that your disagreements are really about the Bible, not about personal opinions.

Pray often for the Lord to open their eyes to the truth. This reminds us that any time someone hears and believes the Bible, it's a work of God himself and not us. Prayer keeps us dependent on God, and, consequently, patient with others. It reminds us that the *only* reason we ourselves understand is because God revealed it to us (Luke 10:21-24).

Pray as well for the Lord to open *your* eyes to any areas of your life that make it difficult for them to listen to you, so that you can own those areas and be actively working on them. It's difficult enough for a parent to receive any kind of instruction from their child, even when the child is right. It's even harder when the child is clearly immature. It's like nails on a chalkboard. A mature and humble parent will learn from their child and see it as the Lord speaking to them through their child. But this is rare experientially. As the child, you need to be aware of this and so work hard in your own life to not give your parents or siblings legitimate reasons to disregard you.

Identify as many positives you can about your family, praise the Lord often for them in prayer, and affirm those things to your own family. When we disagree with our family, especially about very important topics, it's easy to become consumed with our differences. Instead, discipline yourself to find evidences of God's grace in your family. Even if they are unbelievers, you can still affirm the specific strengths of your family as they reflect the God in whose image they are made. Affirmation reminds them you love and value them, in spite of your differences.

Take a long view of change and be patient as you entrust them to the Lord. Often we think that if we can just show an erring family member something in the Bible, they'll automatically change. But our growth typically doesn't work quite that efficiently. The Lord has to humble us. He often needs to till up our hearts to make us ready to receive a certain truth and its implications. So be proactive, but be patient, too. The Lord is ultimately in control of the rate of change in your family, and he makes no mistakes.