

Chapter 8

That It May Go Well With You *Honoring Parents*

The Bible explains to us how the spiritual world works. A part of this explanation is contained in the fifth of the Ten Commandments.

The Fifth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 5:16).¹

If life is not going well for you, it is possible that at least a part of the difficulty is that you are not honoring your parents. Many people suffer in this exact way.

There are a few very important things to note about this commandment.

- First, it is a description of the way the spiritual world operates (see Chapter 2). If we do not honor our parents, there will be negative consequences for us as we reap from the operation of the laws of God.
- Second, there are no exceptions to this commandment mentioned anywhere in the Bible. God does not say to honor our parents only if they are "honorable".
- Third, there is a positive promise if we are able to honor our parents: *that it may be well with you.*² This does not mean there may not be any other obstacles to life going well (such as the presence of Bitter Root Judgments), but it does mean that honoring parents removes this particular barrier that keeps life from going well.

¹ Also see **Leviticus 19:3**.

² **Ephesians 6:2-3**, "*Honor your father and mother,*" which is the first commandment with promise: "*that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.*"

Two Extremes

There are two opposite extremes that people tend to follow in regard to this commandment. On one extreme, sons or daughters may know God's command and feel that they must "honor" their parents and submit to them, no matter how the parents treat them. These children may be stuck in this subservient attitude because of the biblical admonition in the Fifth Commandment, as well as other scriptures, such as the one in the Old Testament which demands the stoning of a rebellious son.³

The opposite extreme is probably the most common. In this case sons or daughters abandon the relationship with their parents as much as they can. If they are still living at home, they may close the parents out emotionally. If they are adults, they may choose to have as little to do with their parents as possible.

Not obeying the Fifth Commandment may be one of the reasons life is not going well for you.

Both extremes bring wounding, suffering, and adverse consequences into the son or daughter's life.

Not Fair

For many of us, somehow it doesn't seem fair or reasonable that God expects us to honor our father and mother. We find it impossible to do so with honesty and integrity, let alone whole-heartedly. We may say, "You don't know what my parents are like." After all, how could a woman honor an alcoholic father who sexually molested her for many years? This is a valid question that should not be dismissed. Since God always looks on the heart, if you "try" to honor them, but it is done grudgingly, it won't work, and you won't be blessed. Then how do you, with honesty and integrity and without hypocrisy, truly honor dishonorable people? In fact, people who are being authentic and honest with themselves should be asking this question.

³ **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**, *If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.." Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil person from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.*

God Is Fair

Because God is fair and is the God of truth and love, His commandment must bring life. Because of my own childhood, and the experiences of many of my clients, I struggled with this issue. Something didn't make sense to me. Certainly, what I thought He meant didn't fit His character. It dawned on me that maybe the problem was with my understanding and not with the commandment. This motivated me to research the issue more deeply. After all, our loving God told us about this spiritual principle so that we can be blessed.

What Did God Mean?

I spent a great deal of time investigating this question. I found the answer to be very elusive. I read every commentary and discussion of the subject that I could find, but the pieces were not coming together for me. There were lots of opinions, but none of them seemed to ring true. I was puzzled.

Just at that moment, a person died who had at one time been very close to me. This was a person who previously hurt me a great deal, and our relationship had been almost non-existent for over 10 years. On the plane ride on the way to her funeral, I decided to drink a toast to her. As I held the little wineglass up and toasted her, I suddenly understood what the Lord meant by "dishonoring."

I realized that while she was alive, I had been incapable of toasting her. There was deep within me a fear; a fear that if I ever thought kindly of her, we would again become close and I would again be wounded. I realized that in my heart I had "dishonored" her.⁴

The essence of dishonoring our parents is based on fear - fear that if we soften towards them, they will again wound us.

I had done exactly what people do when their parents have hurt them. They are afraid to think positively about their parents, or to make any sort of positive gesture towards them. They are afraid that this will make them vulnerable to further wounding by their parents. Consequently they find themselves unable to think positively about their

⁴ Since she was not my parent, I had not violated the Fifth Commandment. Therefore my "dishonoring" of her, though it was real, did not have the same impact on my life as would have occurred if she had been my mother.

parents in any way. They find it difficult to think of any of the parents' positive attributes (most parents have some positive characteristics, if the person will allow themselves to think about them) and so they cannot reach out to their parents. This is a wall they have built inside themselves for protection. Building such a wall is what it means to "dishonor" their parents.⁵

Dishonoring Differs From Judging

On the surface it may seem that dishonoring parents is an example of the more general command not to judge others. However, as we will see, there are some major differences between "judging" and "dishonoring." One of the differences has to do with whether we are prohibited from doing it, or commanded to do it. The command not to judge only carries a prohibition. If you judge a person, you set in motion God's law against you until you forgive the person who offended you and are yourself forgiven by the Lord. If the person is not your parent, you are not obligated to enter into a close relationship with them after you have forgiven them.

On the other hand, the command to honor parents carries a positive command. An important feature of this command to honor our parents is that it is not a one time act. The Greek word used in Matthew 15:4 by Jesus (where He quotes the Fifth Commandment) makes it clear that honoring father and

Dishonoring parents and judging them are different, but they are still linked together. When you find yourself unable to honor them, it is because you have judged them.

mother is an ongoing future requirement.⁶ This implies that in some manner you are to continue to hold them in your heart. Not only are you not to have a negative attitude, but you must have a positive attitude towards them. A grudging attitude and actions done out of duty will not suffice. Consequently, this is very problematic, and can be the source of much anxiety and difficulty which many experience in obeying the Fifth

⁵ Unfortunately, this same wall separates the person from God. See the paragraph, "How We See God" later in this chapter.

⁶ In **Matthew 15:4** where Jesus speaks of honoring parents, ("*timeo*"), the Greek tense (present imperative) refers to ". . . a command to do something in the future which involves continuous or repeated action" (Zodhiates, p.1571). Consequently, honoring is not a one-time event, but rather it is an ongoing future requirement.

Commandment. Again, to make matters worse, God didn't say to honor parents only if they are "honorable." Your mandate to honor them is not conditioned upon their character. God simply says that you need to honor them if life is to go well for you.

Though dishonoring and judging are different, they are still linked together. If you have not judged your parents you will find it easy to honor them. On the other hand, the more harshly you have judged them, the more difficult it will be for you to honor them. When you find it difficult to honor them, this is a symptom that you have judged them. While you have a root of bitterness lodged in your heart, it is probably impossible for you to turn your heart towards them. The only way that you can honor them with integrity and honesty is for your heart to be healed --- for the Bitter Root Judgments to be removed and replaced with the love of Jesus. When you have succeeded in forgiving them, honoring them becomes possible. The more Bitter Root Judgments that have been removed, the easier it will be to truly honor them.

As you work through your Bitter Root Judgments with the Lord, you will eventually reach the place of healing where you will easily find yourself concerned about their welfare, and blessing them.

Recap Of Major Features Of "Honoring" Parents

Honoring your parents relates to your COMMITMENT to pursue the relationship!

1. Honoring does not relate to the individual areas or specific ways where parents transgressed you and you judged them.
2. First you judged them, and then you dishonored them by abandoning them in your heart.
3. Therefore, there is no such thing as dishonorable parents, just sinful ones.
4. Since honoring parents is first an attitude of the heart, it is probably an all-or-nothing proposition: you either honor them (desire and pursue relationship) or you don't. Your heart is either turned towards them or not.
5. There are no exceptions to honoring parents listed in Scripture.
6. Therefore, the necessity to honor parents does not depend on how good or bad your parents were/are; and consequently honoring has nothing to do with what they did or your reaction to it. Of course, the details of how you can honor them, of what is possible in the relationship, will relate to how good or bad they are now.

7. Judging does have to do with what your parents did and your reactions to it, whereas honoring them is a flat mandate without exceptions - a heart attitude. This means that honoring parents is fundamentally different than judging them. Of course, because the same hurtful parenting usually results in both judging and a lack of honoring on your part, judging and dishonoring are always present together.

What Does All This Mean For You?

With all I have said in mind, honoring parents is like panning for gold. Using this as an analogy, when panning for gold, you are free to throw out the tailings (the part that is not gold), but you are not free to stop panning.⁷ You cannot say, "This is such low grade ore with so little gold that I'll just stop panning." It is true that some batches of ore (one's own parents) may contain less gold than other batches (some other parents). But gold exists in your parents if you will keep searching. Each parent is not totally bad (though you may feel that way), but Dad or Mom also have good qualities, if you will look for them. Of course, the better your parents were, the easier it will be to honor them; but easy or hard, the mandate is still there.

You are free to throw out the "tailings," but you are not free to stop "panning" for gold.

In panning for gold it is important to know the difference between gold and tailings if you are to accurately discern which is which. If something you need from your parents is not present, appraise it as such. You cannot get from them what they are not capable of giving. You can't change tailings into gold by wishing they were gold.

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If you are not familiar with panning for gold, I will briefly describe it. In areas where there is gold in the ground, streambeds often will have gold and sand mixed together. In "panning" for gold, you take a shallow metal dish, put gravel and water in it, and gently tilt it back and forth. The gravel is lighter than the gold, and it will gradually spill out of the dish and leave the gold in the dish. It is a time consuming process, and it takes patience.

What This Mandate To Honor Parents **DOES NOT** Mean

Though you are required by the Lord to keep searching for the "gold" in your parents, there are misconceptions about your responsibility to honor them that need to be clarified.

Honoring parents does not mean:

- Letting them abuse you.
- Letting them manipulate or control you.
- Submitting to their guilt trips.
- Liking them.
- Always agreeing with them, refraining from arguing or having conflict with them.
- Submitting to their authority, or do what they tell you once you are grown.
- Needing to spend all your free time or holidays with them.
- Taking care of them while they are capable of caring for themselves.
- Having to live near them.
- Abandoning your own self-care, loving of yourself, or honoring of your own needs and emotions at all times to meet theirs.
- Neglecting to protect and defend yourself, your spouse, and your children.

What This Mandate To Honor Parents **DOES** Mean

There are certain responsibilities that you do have towards your parents as a part of your responsibility to honor them.

- It does mean that you are to be committed to panning for gold. You are to be honest about their imperfections (their wounds and bad fruit), but you must be able to give them every benefit of the doubt. You need to see them in the best light possible (as long as it is the truth). You are not free to simply abandon the relationship, as you are free to do with many other difficult, hurtful relationships. Your parents are valuable to you (the root meaning of the Greek word to honor),⁸ even though you may not be aware of this. This special

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The Hebrew and Greek words themselves also convey the level of importance. These words carry the meaning of "heavy," "weighty," "valuable," and "costly."

See **Endnote #8-1** for more detail on the meaning of these Hebrew and Greek words.

relationship with your parents is somewhat akin to marriage. You are not to "divorce" them. You are spiritually, and perhaps mysteriously, connected with them, even if you don't want this to be true. Not honoring them ("divorcing" them) hurts you. God says so. At some time in your life your parents probably did some loving things and sometimes acted in loving ways. Because children want so desperately to be loved by their parents, you need to know that these memories are cherished somewhere inside you. The more rare the good memories were, the more tightly you will probably be hanging onto those few crumbs. These good memories will be hidden somewhere in your heart. However, it may be very difficult for you to look at those memories. In fact, they may be well hidden from your conscious awareness by your defenses. But that does not eliminate their existence.

- You do need to honor them with an open heart as unto the Lord, not grudgingly or simply out of obligation or striving (will power). God always looks on the heart and not simply on your behavior. If you cannot do this, if your heart is still bitter, then forgiveness and repentance are not complete. This inability to have compassion for your parents is bad fruit and it means that you still have some work to do with the Lord to deal with the bad roots.
- It does mean, *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men* (Romans 12:18). Note *as much as depends on you*. You cannot control the other person, and are only responsible *as much as depends on you*. You are not responsible for your parents' choices or behavior. Honoring them does mean that you are free to refuse to relate to them in unhealthy ways.
- Honoring does mean that while you are a child in the home you are to obey them in any way you can that is not in conflict with your relationship with Jesus and responsibilities to Him.
- Honoring does mean that you will care for them, if necessary, in their old age.⁹ However, in the spirit of love, to simply support them financially does not seem to be an adequate or complete answer as to how to honor them. What is important is not so much what a person

does to honor them, but rather whether their heart is turned towards their parents.

- Honoring does also mean that all the other mandates about your relationships with other people apply to your relationship with your parents. I will not elaborate on this here, because our relationships with other people is a huge subject, and it is one of the main themes of the Bible, summed up by Jesus:

Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40).

The Nature Of Parent-Child Responsibilities Change Over Time

In evaluating your future relationship with your parents, it is important that you understand that your responsibilities towards your parents change dramatically as you grow up. Children living in their parents' home are a very different circumstance than adult children who have left the home, and Scripture makes clear these changing responsibilities.

For instance, sometimes Ephesians 6:1-4 can be misunderstood to mean that adult children are to continue to "obey" their parents. ¹⁰

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth;" And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

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"In the original Ten Commandments it is addressed not so much to younger children still in the care of their parents as to older children, who are called upon to exercise a sense of responsibility for the welfare of their parents who are growing old. This seems to be its significance here in Ephesians also. To honour one's parents implies obedience on the part of young children, but with grown-up sons and daughters it implies rather an attitude of continued respect, consideration, and care" (Mitton, p.211).

"Even after we have attained our majority, are regarded in our culture as being no longer under the authority of our parents, and are therefore no longer under obligation to 'obey' them, we still must continue to 'honour' them. Our parents occupy a unique position in our lives. If we honour them as we should, we will never neglect or forget them . . . Thus to isolate, and even symbolically to reject, one's own parents can seldom be reconciled with the command to honour them" (Stott, p. 243).

See **Endnote #8-2** for details on parent-child relationships, and how they change over time.

As adults, children do not owe their parents this same sort of obedience, and parents no longer have this same level of responsibility to make sure the children live Godly lives.

Family Relationships Are Always Reciprocal

Regardless of the age of the children, family relationships are always reciprocal. The relationships are never that of master and slave. For instance, though parents have a great deal of authority over their dependent children, yet their authority is counterbalanced by the command to nurture the children. This reciprocity between children and parents is expressed in Colossians 3:20-21, where the admonition to the children is counterbalanced with a responsibility to the parents:

Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged,

So the responsibility in the relationship between the child and the parents is not a one-way responsibility. Both the child and the parents have responsibilities.

"The instruction to children to obey their parents presupposes, as we have seen, the fact of parental authority. Yet when Paul outlines how parents should behave towards their children, it is not the exercise, but the restraint, of their authority which he urges upon them. The picture he paints of fathers as self-controlled, gentle, patient educators of their children is in stark contrast to the norm of his own day . . . So human fathers are to care for their families as God the Father cares for his."
(Stott, p. 245).

There Is Always A Way You Can Honor Parents

Several years ago I was counseling a man whose mother was a raging alcoholic. He was the result of a casual affair, and his father had never been around. When my client was still an infant, the government took him away from his mother because she was so neglectful. He spent his entire childhood in orphanages. He asked me how he could possibly "honor" his parents. Because his parents were such an extreme case of

poor parenting, this was a difficult but valid question. I pointed out that he was good looking, intelligent, healthy, and very athletic. Though his parents did not purpose to give him these gifts, nevertheless he possessed them. He could honor them for these. The key point was that his heart needed to become turned towards his parents, to seek the good in them, regardless of how little "gold" he could find.

There Is No Formula

As an adult, there is no set formula as to what "honoring" means in your relationship with your parents. Some parents are very safe, and honoring them is easy and can be done in a broad range of ways. Others parents are very destructive, either to you or to your children. In such situations there may have to be severe limitations as to what is safe. It is not wise to let one's pedophile father be around one's young children. As an extreme example, if a parent is actively involved in witchcraft, any direct contact with them may be inappropriate. But in such a situation, you can still turn your heart towards them by praying for them. If your heart is turned towards them, you will be grieved by the bondage they are in, knowing the destruction that is going on in their lives.

Therefore, "honoring" is an individual issue, and as a result you will need to explore with the Lord what "honoring" would look like for you in your situation.

Honoring your parents is much less complex after your parents have died. The fear is gone, because you know in your heart they can't hurt you again. You only have to deal with the past.

On the other hand, while they are still alive, you have a living relationship to deal with. They may in fact wound you again. It may take courage and require ongoing forgiving for you to explore the ways that you can honor them. Finding the healthy limits of the relationship is sometimes a trial and error quest, but it is a journey you must undertake so that life may go well for you.

My Own Father

My father was a college professor, and was a studious, quiet, non-emotional man. He and my mother were very involved in their own careers, which they loved dearly, and my sister and I were badly neglected. I became jealous of his career and saw it as my competition for his attention. I thus judged him and any scholarly endeavors, and I decided that I didn't want to be like him. I thus scorned any scholarly endeavors.

Despite this, I somehow managed to graduate from college (though I saw my studies as an unwelcome interruption in my social life). As soon as I graduated I left town and hardly looked back. For years I would seldom call my parents, and I virtually never thought about them. Both of them wrote several books, but I never bothered reading any of them. Clearly, I dishonored them.

Then I began my walk of Inner Healing. In the last few years of their lives I began to reconcile with them, and found my heart turning towards them. They both died in 1992, and I began my Masters Degree program in 1994. I was both curious and concerned about whether I would be blocked from entering into this "scholarly" project. I was delighted to discover that I loved graduate school, which was evidence of healing and reconciliation.

Recently I rediscovered their books, and found that I enjoyed reading them. I am now writing a book, and I am enjoying it greatly. Life goes better when we are able to honor our parents.

How We See God

How we view and relate to our parents determines how we see God. Since my parents were kindly but neglectful, I have had very little difficulty seeing God as merciful, but have had a very difficult time believing that He is proactive in my life. As a boy, I had to fend for myself. If I had any need, I had to be proactive in getting it met. For instance, when I was about 12, I wanted a bicycle of my own. I had to find a used one, and I had to come up with the money to buy it. Even for necessities, such as clothing, I had to tell them about my need, or they wouldn't even notice I had outgrown or worn out my old ones. They weren't mean spirited, just neglectful.

When I became a Christian, I saw God as being like my parents. I still had a subtle, unspoken and unconscious view that I was on my own. If I didn't initiate, God wouldn't be there.

Fortunately for me, my view was in error, and God has been diligently working to show me what He is really like. Time after time He has proven to me that He is in charge of my life, and has made it clear what a good thing that is. He initiates, and I simply follow. He is not neglectful like my parents.

See page 66 for more on how we see God.

The context of the Fifth Commandment links our relationship with our parents to our relationship with God.¹¹ This linkage is probably one of the reason why it is so important that we honor father and mother. We all need to see God as He really is.

What About Honoring Other People?

In some cultures, and in some families, there is an expectation, and even a requirement, that a person must honor other people, such as uncles and aunts. Some other persons that you may have been told to honor are: grandparents, adoptive parents, uncles and aunts, other older family members, older siblings who raised you, foster parents, church leaders, teachers, and other people in authority.

Is there a requirement by God that you "honor" other people beyond father and mother? For a Christian, Scripture is the only sure guide. Father and mother are the only people for whom there is a clear mandate to honor in the way that the Fifth Commandment requires.¹² Anything beyond this is speculative. If God expected more, He would have told us clearly.

Scripture does talk about "honoring" some other classes of people; but these admonitions are different than what He means by "honoring" of parents in the Fifth Commandment.¹³

For instance, the Lord does have a lot to say about the attitude you are to have in your relationships with all people, such as *love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:39).

¹¹ The first of the two stone tablets given to Moses and Israel, containing the first Five Commandments, specified their duty to God; and the second tablet, containing the Sixth through the Tenth Commandments, specified their duties to other men. The fifth commandment (honoring father and mother) is on the first tablet, the one regarding our relationship to God, thus bringing the honoring of our parents into our duty to God (Stott, p. 239).

See **Endnote #8-1** for more on how our view of God is linked to our view of our parents.

¹² The Bible does also use the Greek verb *timeo* (to honor) with regard to widows (1 Timothy 5:3), all people, and the king (1 Peter 2:17). However, these others are not mentioned in the Fifth Commandment, so the honoring due these people is probably not on the same level of importance, or impact, in our lives as is the command to honor parents. We cannot with authority go beyond Scripture. If God had wanted to include these others in the Commandment, He would have done so.

¹³ Perhaps one could make a case for honoring grandparents and adoptive parents in the spirit of the Fifth Commandment. But, because Scripture is not clear on this, one must be very cautious about demanding this of children. Of course, a person could always choose to honor such people, and certainly this would be pleasing to the Lord.

See **Endnote #8-3** for more on honoring grandparents and adoptive parents.

Summary

If life is not going well for you, it is very possible that at least a part of the difficulty is that you are not honoring your parents. The Fifth Commandment is a description of spiritual reality. If you do not align your life with this spiritual truth, you suffer. The laws of God are then working to bring difficulty into your life.

The necessity to honor one's parents is an ongoing future requirement. It requires that we have our hearts turned towards them, and that we seek to have as much relationship with them as is possible in keeping with safety and healthy self-care.

It is important that we see the truth about them. Seeing their faults is not "dishonoring." However, we are not free to ignore their good attributes. We are not free to reject them in total because of their faults, but we must keep seeking to uncover and recognize what is good in them. We need to keep "panning for gold," because there is always "gold" somewhere.

"Judging" and "dishonoring" are different, but linked to each other. If we have judged our parents, it will be very difficult to truly "honor" them. If we find it difficult to "honor" them, we probably have some forgiving to do first.

Honoring parents is not just a nice option. It is essential if you want life to go well for you.

There is no formula regarding what sort of relationship you can have with them. Each person's situation is different. You need to insist that any relationship with them be give-and-take, and healthy. It is important to recognize that your relationship with them as an adult is different than as a child.

When you find your heart turned towards your parents, and you are thus "honoring" them, you will have removed a major barrier to your life going well.