

# Obey Your Parents

Ephesians 6:1-3 | May 20, 2018 | Bryce Beale

Christ does not demand of any child a toil he has not carried first himself. When he summons one of his saints to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, with fatal mountains looming on either side and a midnight sky of sorrows above, that saint is directed to follow the trail marked by the sandal prints of Jesus of Nazareth. He passed this way before you.

As followers, we like to know our leaders are willing to do what they require of us. We delight in the picture preserved from history of Winston Churchill out among the battered Brits, helping to shovel away the rubble of London; or of General Washington crossing the Delaware with his men, a joint victim of the privations of that winter.

Jesus is just such a leader to his army. Christians in the face of danger or difficulty have always delighted to say, “The Lord goes before us.”

And so it proves to be in the matter of childhood. Today the word of God requires that children obey their parents, and that men and women of any age honor theirs. For some of you, this will be a difficult command. Your parents have not been reasonable; the wounds you have received from them have left scars upon the surface of your mind. To hear from heaven, “Honor your parents,” is akin to hearing an irrelevant cliché.

Others here are in the home now and find themselves torn in half—your peers are pulling with all their might on one of your arms, while your parents pull on the other. To obey your parents who seem, to you and to your friends, outdated in their way of thinking, would require that you sacrifice the respect of your peers. It is a lot to ask.

But it is what Christ asks. And though we could not complain if the command came to us alone, a single telegram from the command center of the universe, it does not come alone. We have not received a bare telegram; Christ himself has come from the command center and said to you, “Watch how I do it, and then you try.”

Christ is the archetype of the obedient child. “I do nothing,” he said, “on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”<sup>1</sup> You may choose, having heard this message this morning, to rebel against the authority of your parents; you may choose to cast contempt on the name or memory of your parents for their failings; but you cannot make that choice and look like Jesus too.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn. 8:28 (ESV).

The Son of God set before our sight, in his earthly sojourn, what it means to be a good son. He obeys his Father completely and freely. He does not need to be pushed into obedience, but he goes there willingly—even when the path of obedience leads out of Jerusalem and up to Calvary.

Yes, in one sense, our Savior could not have done otherwise since his will was perfect, yet somehow he felt something of the pressures we feel when we are called to obey. “Although he was a son,” we read, “he learned obedience through what he suffered.”<sup>2</sup> The Shepherd goes before his sheep and leads them out—he would not send them along any trail he did not walk first himself. That is the marvel contained in that familiar phrase, “Follow me.” He goes first.

And when he calls a young child to obey his parents, or a grown daughter to honor hers, he knows what he is commanding. Whatever pain or personal death is required for you to submit to or honor your parents, it cannot be greater than Jesus’ obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross.

We have come today in our study of Ephesians to the beginning of chapter 6, into a territory where Christ has gone before us. Paul has just finished addressing wives and husbands on the topic of their marriage; now he extends his discussion of family to the children.

### EPHESIANS 6:1-3

As we have noted before, Christianity is not always unique in the commands it lays down. Here the command is, “Children, obey your parents.” You could find the same command in the tenants of Confucianism, I am sure. Many cultures recognize the importance of obedient children. But Christianity is unique in that it provides the only adequate answer to, “Why?”

My goal therefore in the minutes that follow is to discern two things from our text. First, what is commanded? What does it mean to obey and to honor one’s parents? But secondly, why should anyone pay heed to this command? Both are important subjects, and we will consider them both in turn.

## Honor and Obey

The command itself is stated in two ways, and the first is found at the start of our passage: “Children, *obey* your parents.”

If you are a possible candidate for that word, “Children,” it is amazing how fuzzy the passage becomes. If you are a teenager, you may think, “Well, I am not a child, I’m a teen. I’m not sure this passage speaks to

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<sup>2</sup> Heb. 5:8.

me.” Or if you are younger, you may say, “It says, ‘Children, obey your parents in the Lord,’ but I haven’t yet trusted in Christ, I’m not in the Lord; I’m not sure this passage applies to me.”

If, on the other hand, you are a parent to whom the obedience is due, there is no clearer passage in all of holy writ. The “Children” mentioned here are the young people in your home. They are the six-year-old as well as the sixteen-year-old. And in this case you are correct.

We could talk long about the meaning of that single word, “Children,” and try to analyze the precise age range it intends, but there is no certain age range meant by that word, in and of itself. We do better to look at the context and to ask, “What ages was Paul thinking of when he wrote the word down?” We know he imagined young people who could obey and who could understand what he was writing to them about. He did not expect that newborns would comprehend his argument—so though it is important that parents help their children, even as newborns, to learn good habits if they can, this command to obedience is not probably intended for newborns. So, if you are here as a newborn this morning, you may rest easy, you are possibly excluded from this command.

But when a child can understand the command, “Obey,” then that child is obligated to do so. If, in other words, you understand the gist of what I am saying now, you are not too young to be considered “Children” in this passage—you must obey your parents, God desires it of you.

But when are you too old to be considered “Children”? Well, we know that Jesus at the age of twelve, after going to the temple with his parents, “went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus obeyed at the age of twelve because he was still under the direct authority of his parents. Later in life, when his mother summoned him, he would refuse to come because he was no longer under her authority; but here, at twelve, he was, and so he was obligated to obey.

You who are young, the definition of “Children” who must obey their parents that your parents themselves have given you proves, in this case, to be true. What have they said? “As long as you are living under my roof you will abide by my rules.” Teenagers, you are not excluded from this command to obey your parents.

But what does it mean to obey? It means to do what your parents tell you to do. And the only exception is when your parents command you to sin—in that case you must obey God rather than men. But in every other case, you must obey men, or more specifically, a man and a woman. If their command to you is inconvenient, if it comes at a bad

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:51.

time, if it interrupts what you are doing or ruins your plans for the day, you must still obey.

You who are young, society expects very little of you. They think, “A teenager cannot be expected to drop everything and obey his parents.” They think you’ll prove just another puppet in the system, mimicking the models they place in shows and movies for you. They expect you to obey half-heartedly half the time, and only when coerced. They expect you to go behind your parents’ back, and they will laugh and applaud when you sneak back home through the window.

But I do not think you so small as to be capable of nothing more than that!

Most of history knew two categories of people: children and adults. Children were under the authority and the care of their parents; they did not have the freedom and privileges of adulthood, but neither did they have its heavy responsibilities. Adults had those responsibilities, and also the freedom and privileges that come with them. But in the early 1900’s, with the reform of labor laws and the mandating of education through high school, more and more young people were not working jobs at fourteen or fifteen, as they had been before, but were in school. So far so good. But one unexpected consequence of these reforms was a new category of persons: teenagers.

There is nothing wrong with being in the age group of a teenager, but the societal expectations placed upon teenagers, that has been a grave problem. Teenagers, like children, are dependent upon the care of their parents; but like adults, they are told to expect the freedoms of adulthood. Society has told you to demand the privileges of adulthood—for example, choosing what you will do on your own without the interference of your parents—while shirking the responsibilities of adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

I refuse to think you incapable of something bigger than petty rebellion against your parents. You were created to do the will of God, and that will for you, so long as you are under the care of your parents, is to honor God by obeying them.

Notice too that the obedience commanded is not a bare, begrudged obedience. The second and synonymous command we find in verse 2 of our text—Paul, quoting the fifth of the Ten Commandments, says, “Honor your father and mother.”

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 3, “The Myth of Adolescence,” in Alex and Brett Harris, *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2013).

Unlearn all you have learned about how to treat your parents—the truth is that they should have not only your obedience, but your obedience “with a happy heart,” as your mom has probably said to you.

And here is a command that extends beyond young “Children”—any person who has parents, even if you are a parent yourself, is called to honor his or her mother and father. Adults who were defrauding their aging parents of money that should have been given to their care were rebuked by Jesus by a quotation of this fifth command: “Honor your father and mother.”

I know that some of you, now grown, have parents who have failed you—some have failed you horribly. It may be necessary to set some distance between yourself and your parents, or between them and your family now. Nevertheless, no one is excluded from this command: “Honor your father and mother.” You are not required to obey if you are not under their roof—but you are always bound by the unbreakable command to honor them.

When you speak of your parents, do not let bitterness do the talking. If there are one hundred qualities in them that are worthless, and one amid the heap of ruins that is good, praise the good. Paul told Timothy not to sharply rebuke an older man—your father will always be an older man to you. You may correct your father, but not as though he were your brother. You may disagree with your mother, but not in the way you might disagree with a stranger. “Honor your father and mother.”

I know it is a sort of comic relief in our day to speak ill of in-laws, but how will we justify this spirit from Scripture? I’m afraid this spirit is not from God, but is from the world. Husbands, the way you speak about your in-laws to your wife, and the way you speak to them face-to-face, should make it easier for your wife to honor them in her heart and conduct, and not harder. The list of ways they have wronged you, which may have just now popped into your mind, is irrelevant. I am not speaking of their responsibility, but of yours—you must honor them.

## It is right

We have briefly considered what children are commanded—while in the home they must obey, and at all times they must honor, their parents.

But I doubt this is new to many of you. The need of the moment is not so much the what as the why. Why should you obey and honor your parents?

The summary is given in the first verse: “for this is right.”

And why is it right? We have a hint in our passage—notice Paul’s point in verses 2 and 3: “‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that

you may live long in the land.” At its birth, this promise was given to the nation of Israel, and the land spoken of was a specific land, their land, Canaan. We believe the land promises to Israel will be fulfilled, as originally intended. Yet here the promise has matured, so to speak, into a young Christian. The first commandment of the Mosaic Law to have an explicit promise appended to it was written not just for the benefit of Israel, but for our benefit too, upon whom the end of the ages has come.

And the promise to you who are Christian children or teenagers is this: if you obey and honor your parents, God will bless you. No, the promise is not an absolute one—many obedient Christian children have in history died young. Some have faced persecution which hastened death. But as a general promise the word of God holds true. Do you want to live a long and happy life? You are more likely to do it in subjection to your parents than as rebels against them.

Returning then to our question, we ask, “Why is it right to obey your parents?” And the answer is hinted in the promise—why would God promise to bless you for obeying your parents? Because he is pleased by it! It is right for you to obey your parents for the simple reason that God delights in children obeying their parents. No further justification is needed—the delight of God is the entire ground of morality. God’s pleasure determines what is right and what is wrong. He takes pleasure in you obeying your parents, so it is right.

If there is any doubt about this the parallel passage in Colossians 3 removes the doubt: “Children,” it reads, “obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

But may we dig a few inches deeper into this text? Here is a shovel of a question that will help us do it: Why is it that children obeying their parents pleases the Lord?

And when we upturn the dirt, we find an answer not unlike what we have seen the last three weeks, as we have considered marriage. A marriage in which the man loves and leads and the woman submits pleases the Lord because this marriage reflects well its original image: Christ and the church. When you see a healthy marriage, you see Christ in his glory, loving and being loved by his people.

When you see a child in a healthy relationship with his or her parents—a Christian teenager who submits willingly to the rules of the house, for example—you see more than the teenager. You see Christ.

If it were possible for your eye to gaze back across the fields of time, into the eternity that lies like a chasm behind our whole world, you

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<sup>5</sup> V. 20.

would find the origin of human families. Long before Adam was formed from the dust, the stuff of which marriages and parent-child relationships is made was active and alive. True, we are not pantheists—we recognize that the created order is not a part of God, but separate from him. Yet it is fashioned, to some degree, from his likeness.

For long before the world was crafted by God's hand, God existed in a perfect unity of three in one. There was no lack in that being or in that union, which God in turn created a world to fill; rather there was an abundance which overflowed into a world.

Everything that we would one day know as "family" was present in the eternal Trinity. There was love, of course, perfectly between all of the members, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There was singularity of purpose. There was authority, and there was submission. When in an unspeakable eon past the Father desired to send the Son into the world, the Son was of the same mind. No rebellion or dissension was ever suggested. And when the Father and the Son intended to send the Spirit, the Spirit was glad to consent.

We speak of mysteries that are hard to put into our own words, but the point of all is that "Children, obey your parents" was not an idea invented by a Hebrew on a hill somewhere—it is the consequence of who God is and who he has always been. There are no alternative methods of childhood; obedience is inseparably part of what it means to be a child. It is right, or fitting, for children to obey. It could not be otherwise. Why? Because God could not be otherwise, and he wanted your relationship with your parents to look like his Son's relationship with him. That is the very reason you were born *as a child* to your parents!

You then who are here and who are younger, you children yet at home, do not dare think yourselves in an unimportant time of life. Do not think, "When I grow up, then I can be a Christian; when I grow up, then I will live for the Lord; right now I am only a child." But the Bible says, "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*." Do it as someone who knows that when you obey mom and dad, you please the Lord; do it as someone who is a true follower of Jesus, who has trusted in him, and who lives for him.

You have it mistaken, if you think you are less able to please Christ and make him known to the world, to serve him with your whole soul, than adults. You are able to make him known in a way that we who are grown no longer can—you can obey your parents and so display the obedience of Christ to his Father. You can show the glory of Jesus tomorrow, when your mother asks you to pick up your room, in a way that I cannot. The world may think little of you, but you are not little—

not in God's eyes. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as you, and we adults cannot even get into it unless we become like you are.

In the 1700's there was a revival that took place in the Silesian mountains, along the border of Poland and the Czech Republic. At the time Protestant Christians were being forced to convert to Catholicism, their churches were closed. And in that hour of need a revival broke out and began to spread, with prayer meetings taking place in fields at multiple times during the day, with hundreds and sometimes thousands attending the meetings. The effects of this revival were felt for decades to come in Europe and undoubtedly beyond.

But one remarkable feature of this revival is that the prayer meetings were not made up mainly of adults. It was the children who went out into the fields to pray. One account of the event written at that time reads:

It had begun in the Silesian mountains and thereafter gone forth from one place to another....The children, male and female, 4 to 14 years in age, with an unusual devotion for their age, assemble themselves in a certain place to pray together with childlike devotion daily. They come together in the morning about 7, around Noon and around 4. These poor, hard-pressed children, out of their own desire and without their being given some prescribed method, began to assemble to pray.<sup>6</sup>

It is known today as the Silesian Children's Prayer Revival.

Children, Christ welcomes you. When others would keep you from Jesus or say, "Wait until you are older, and then you can follow Jesus," hear Jesus saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them."

You have not always obeyed your parents, you have not always done what is right and what you ought to have done. This is sin in the eyes of God and it is a serious thing. The wrath of God is against sin. But remember the cross—on that dark day when Jesus was crucified, the wrath of God that we deserve for our sin was against him. He suffered, so that we don't have to.

And he suffered because he wants you, child that you are, now and not later, to trust in him and be forgiven. You can try from this point forward to obey your parents every time they tell you to do

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<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, "Gründliche Nachrichten Von derer Evangelischen Schlesier Kinder Andacht/Oder Denen/von denen Kindern in Schlesien/unter freyem Himmel/auf offenem Felde gehaltenen Bet=Stunden," (AFSt 121 A17), 2-4 qtd. in *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, ed. Christian T. Collins Winn et. al (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2012), 75. See also Bruce Hindmarsh, "Let the Little Children Come to Me," *ChristianityToday.com*, Christianity Today International (May 27, 2009; accessed May 20, 2018).

something—and even if you were to succeed, you would still be guilty for the sins you have already committed. There is no hope in just trying harder. What you need is to come to Jesus, not with the claim, “Look, Jesus, I’ve been trying my best to obey my parents, can I get into heaven now?” No, you need to come to Jesus and say, “Jesus, I want to come to you, but I have not always done what is right. But I know you died for sins—will you please forgive me for mine?”

If you come like that, you will be forgiven. More than that, you will become in truth a child of God. You will be a Christian—not a sort-of Christian until you grow up, but a complete Christian now.

Children, the Bible does not dismiss you as unimportant. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord.” Teenagers, do not waste these years! You and you only can display for the world the beautiful obedience of Christ to his Father, by your obedience to your parents.

## Conclusion

I come to the end of this message, and I must as a final appeal return to the promise of this text. The command to honor parents is the very first with a promise, and that promise is added in order to emphasize this command, to put it in bold font.

And the promise is that if you flee from Egypt and shirk its culture of disdain for parents; if you prefer the reproach of Christ and choose, as a Christian, to obey and honor your parents, it will go well with you and you will live long on the earth.

As I have said, this does not represent an absolute promise that proves true in every case—but it is a promise. It is God’s way of saying, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.”<sup>7</sup> “Put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing.”<sup>8</sup>

Yes, if you obey your parents you are unlikely to be killed by those many things that end a young person’s life early—drugs, alcohol, illegal activity, sexual disease, reckless behavior. But more, if you choose against culture and against natural preference to obey your parents and to show them honor, you will live in the sunshine of God’s pleasure. You will honor Christ by your display of him, and God’s word is, “Those who honor me I will honor.”<sup>9</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> Ps. 81:10.

<sup>8</sup> Mal. 3:10.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Sam. 2:30.