



A WISE WALK FOR CHILDREN

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Ephesians 6:1-3

Eleventh Message

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The Bible presents two images for how God relates to his people. The first image is that of a husband. God addresses Israel as his bride in the Old Testament, while the New Testament refers to the church as the bride of Christ. The second image is that of a father. In the O.T., God calls Israel his son, and in the N.T., believers in Christ relate to God as his sons and daughters. In our two messages on marriage we have reflected on the first image, that of God as a husband. As we discuss parents and children today and next Sunday, we will reflect on the second image, that of God as our Father.

In this section of Ephesians Paul is examining several important relationships in the context of believers submitting to one another out of our respect for and adoration of Jesus (Eph 5:21). As husbands and wives submit to one another through love and respect, they learn about the relationship between Christ and the church. In the same way, children and parents are called to submit their lives to one another and to the Lord, and in so doing they learn about the church and her relationship with the Father.

This morning we will discuss how children should relate to their parents. Next week the focus will be on parents. Our text is Ephesians 6:1-3:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. (Eph 6:1-3, NASB)

The first question we have to discuss here is this: Is Paul speaking to children under a certain age, or is he referring to a life-long relationship? In the N.T., the word children is used of parent-child relationships, but it has a broader use, too. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul exhorted believers to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" (5:1). The word is also used as a form of address. For instance, the apostle Paul addressed the Galatian believers as "my children" (Gal 4:19), and Timothy as "my true child." (1 Tim 1:2). A man or woman who becomes a believer at age 70 becomes a "child" of Abraham and a "child" of God (John 1:12; 8:39). The question for us is: Does this word apply to high schoolers, college students and children living at home, no matter how old they are?

In Paul's day, the transition from child to adult was more well defined than today. The age at which chil-

dren are considered to be "grown up" has lengthened considerably. You can get a driver's license at 16, and enter the armed services at age 18, but you can't drink until you are 21. You can be classed as a dependent by your parents for tax purposes until you reach 24. You can graduate, but you may not be able to find work. Furthermore, over the past thirty years the age at which young people are marrying has risen dramatically.

Here, the word children refers to younger children living at home and dependent on their parents for their physical needs. Some aspects of Paul's word, however, might well be binding on us until our parents die. I feel that this word applies completely for younger children in our own day, but decreases as they grow older and the relationship with their father and mother changes. The degree to which it applies could vary, based upon a child's maturity, cultural background and life situation. This is a matter for prayer and careful evaluation for each family. There is no set formula.

Notice that Paul gives two commands. First, he says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." In this context, submission means obedience. The word obey carries the O.T. idea of hearing and then doing. The word is actually a compound, from the Greek verb "to listen" and the preposition "under." One who obeys hears a word and yields, stays under it.

So the word to children is, "obey your parents in the Lord." Although the phrase "in the Lord" is absent from some of the early manuscripts, it fits the context of what Paul has been saying. In the same way that the Lord is "behind" the husband, so too he is "behind" the parent. Generally speaking, children should obey their parents in the same way that all believers should obey the Lord. They do not need to obey blindly, without thought or question; they are free to seek understanding and express disagreement. But they are called to trust. Of course, they are not called to obey a parent whose demand is inconsistent with God's revealed will with respect to morality and ethics.

Paul's second command is a quotation from the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother." "Honor" has the idea of giving weight (the Hebrew word means "to be heavy"). Children are called not only to obey, but also to respect and love their parents, to take their word seriously and acknowledge their God-given authority. In the N.T., the idea of honoring

also includes financial considerations.

The O.T. commandment to honor parents is profound. Today, respect for parents and for the elderly in general has diminished. Children call their parents names, treat them with disrespect in public, use their property without asking, and show little gratitude. One wonders who is running the show.

Attached to the two commands are two reasons for children to yield their lives to their parents. First, because it is the right thing to do. The word righteous or just comes from this Greek word. Paul says that this way of relating is proper and good. It is right for children to obey their parents, just as it is right for us to obey the Lord. Doing otherwise is wrong.

Second, the child honors his parents because this will yield a blessing. There is a promise connected to the fifth commandment, and here Paul combines phrases from both Exod 20 and Deut 5. Honoring parents will enhance and benefit a child's life. The O.T. blessing was physical ("prosperity and long life"), mainly because the blessings were connected to the land. In Christ, honoring parents will yield social stability, a healthy society, contentment, security, and godly character.

So it is both proper and beneficial for children to submit to their parents by obeying and honoring them. A lack of obedience in this area will result in character traits that will reject authority in society. A lack of respect in this area sets the pattern for a lack of respect towards people in general. On the other hand, a child who obeys externally and honors internally, will have more of a servant heart towards others. While children will test the boundaries, they will be protected by the rules their parents have put in place.

Children who refuse to heed the danger signs face great harm. Parents know more than children. They know them better than the children know themselves. Wise children listen to their parents. A proper perspective and attitude will benefit them greatly. They may be unhappy with their parents at times, but they have much to gain by following the biblical mandate to obey them. As television personality Andy Rooney said, "I've learned that simple walks with my father around the block on summer nights when I was a child did wonders for me as an adult."

Having dealt with the text in general, let's now turn our attention to practical principles for children. Paul does not lay down hard and fast rules, but he gives some principles that require wisdom in applying. Also, since we do not have many children with us this morning, I want to say some things that apply to young people of different ages.

Our relationship with our parents is one of our major influences in life. It is filled with emotions, expectations, longings, disappointments, joys and sorrows. Some

people have wonderful relationships with their parents, but many do not.

A. The goal for children is to grow to maturity.

All children begin their fight for independence at an early age. It is right and normal for them to desire this and to experience it in varying degrees. However, independence and maturity are not necessarily the same thing. Sometimes the goal of maturity is clouded with fears, family dynamics, and desires that don't help children achieve maturity.

For example, the desire to get away from nagging parents might not be consistent with the healthy goal of maturity. Maturity for children involves becoming emotionally, spiritually and financially independent of their parents. Signs of maturity appear when they are not controlled emotionally, when they are not dependent on their parents' faith, but establish their own relationship with God, and when they can provide for their own physical needs. This is a lengthy process. It does not necessarily happen when a child moves out of the house. The goal for children is to graduate from a place of dependence to independence. Unfortunately, we can have an unhealthy dependence on our parents well into our adult years. Let us remember Paul's word, "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things" (1 Cor 13:11).

B. It's possible to get a distorted view of obedience and honor that leads to an unhealthy view of oneself.

Obeying and honoring does not mean being perfect—and it involves much more than behavior. Children should not think that if they behave in a certain way, they will find greater acceptance and love at home. It's important for them to express their thoughts and feelings, to have the freedom to disagree and be heard. These are a normal part of development. Children need to give themselves the freedom to make mistakes. They need to guard against a wrong view of obedience that can lead to a preoccupation with behavior and external things. Your identity does not depend on your behavior. It revolves around who you are internally, as a child of God. We will discuss this more next week when the focus is on parents.

C. The idea of honoring our parents can be implemented in a variety of ways, and should continue for their lifetime.

While obedience to our parents' desires and requests may diminish over time, we must continue to honor them. We can treat them with respect, even when we disagree with them. We can take responsibility for our decisions. We can stop being a burden to them, looking to them to bail us out and manipulate their involvement with us. We can move out of the home and become financially independent. We can give them social weight

by honoring them at our weddings and on their birthdays and anniversaries. We can encourage their relationship as a couple, to spend time together apart from us. We can care for them emotionally and even physically as they age. We must remember that at some point they can become like children again. Children need to care for their parents to the degree that the health of the relationship might allow. In other words, children with unhealthy parents may have difficulty caring for them. Many societies do much better in this area than we do in the U.S. There is a host of ways in which we can honor our parents and in doing so can receive the blessing that God has promised in the commandment.

D. At some point we have to deal with unfulfilled expectations and unresolved emotions that we might feel toward our parents.

Some children bear the burden of unrealistic expectations from their parents. Children can hold onto desires they have for how parents should relate to them and love them. But, as people grow older, change is less likely. We have to come to grips with the fact that our parents may never change or become what we would like them to be.

Some children have unresolved emotions. They can love their parents dearly, but feel anger or bitterness toward them. This can be confusing to children who feel they should not have any negative emotions towards their parents. Most people have mixed emotions in this area. If you can have a healthy discussion with your parents, do it now. It is much more difficult to deal with unresolved emotions after they are gone.

I never was able to have that conversation with my parents. But in 1995, seven years after my father died and three years after my mother died, I went to Omaha, Nebraska and had an honest conversation. I sat at their grave and we talked and cried. I shared my love and my hurt. Since than day, I have never felt unresolved in my emotions towards them. So by God's grace we can even resolve these emotions after our parents are gone.

In dealing with unfilled expectations and unresolved emotions, the problem may be ours alone. Perhaps our parents have hurt us deeply and unfairly and we are failing to forgive them. This damages us, not them. Forgiving them doesn't mean that the way they acted was all right. But it's the only way we can be freed from bitterness, resentment and anger.

Perhaps we are failing to let go of our parents as the source of our acceptance, approval and love. Ultimately their role in our lives is to awaken our desires and longings for God. Maturity involves moving from dependence on them to dependence on God. Just because we become independent of our parents does not mean that we become non-dependent. When we take hold of our acceptance and approval from the Lord, then we will be

free from needing something from them.

E. With unhealthy parents we need to establish healthy boundaries.

Some parents are abusive and manipulative. Others fail to take responsibility for their own lives and look to their children to meet their needs and expectations for life and love. Still other parents do not respect their children's need for privacy and independence.

As children grow into adulthood and maturity they may need to establish healthy boundaries with their parents. They cannot control them and probably can't change them, but by God's grace they can establish good boundaries with them, depending on their level of maturity.

Even though we honor our parents, we are not responsible for their happiness and well being. At some point we must let them go, even as they must let us go. We need to realize that we can no more fulfill their expectations than they can ours. Establishing healthy boundaries may make us feel guilty, but we need to know that this is all right and it will yield healthier relationships. Many adults grow up with an unhealthy view of obedience, and as a result they remain in unhealthy and unsafe relationships with their parents and others. Establishing boundaries can help in other relationships as well.

F. As you grow in maturity, begin to see your parents as people who make lots of mistakes and who have deep fears.

My wife and I have lost all four of our parents. As they aged I saw that they had many fears, some of which may have kept me from having a better relationship with them. Parents will make mistakes. Although they are trying to do the right thing, they will not be perfect. Even if you are a teenager, I would encourage you to see your parents as people.

One thing helped me in this regard. In my 20's, I began to realize that my parents were getting older and they would not be around forever. I lived quite a distance from them, so we didn't see each other much. Every time we were together, I thought that it might be the last time I would see one or both of them. This perspective helped me to love and enjoy them as people.

G. Make a commitment to be involved in your parents' lives to the extent that you can.

Your relationship with your parents depends on your history with them, but it may not be what you want it to be. At times our relationship with them is stunted because we are waiting for them to make the first move. In most cases they should do that, and we will talk about that next week. But many parents are too fearful

or too unhealthy to make that first move.

I encourage you to do this as you mature and grow in God's grace. Don't worry about their not calling you. Don't worry about their response. Go ahead and make the call. Initiate the relationship to the extent that they allow. You might find as you initiate a little more that they have been waiting to embrace you but just did not know how to do it.

As I was growing up I struggled with trying to go beyond the surface and relate to my father about deep things. So in my late 20's I decided that since I couldn't talk to him, I would just try hugging him. One day my parents came for a visit, and when my father got out of the car I gave him a hug. I had never hugged him before. I will never forget his response. He grabbed me and gave me the biggest bear hug. I realized in that moment that he desired the same thing I did, but just didn't know how to do it. From that day we never stopped hugging each other.

We will always treasure and desire our parents' love and hugs. Why does this run so deeply within us? Ultimately, the reason that we should have a clear understanding of childhood and relating to parents is so that we can have a clear understanding of how to relate to God our Father. We work at correcting distortions and misconceptions in our relationship with our earthly par-

ents so that we can have a healthy and undistorted relationship with our heavenly parent.

In our relationship with God we are learning to obey and to honor. But we are also learning that it isn't about externals only. We are learning that our identity is not based on what we do. We are learning that God is safe and trustworthy. We are learning not to feel shame and guilt when we make mistakes. We are learning that God wants to hug us.

As God's children we grow in maturity but never abandon our child-like trust in him as our Father. This is what Jesus meant in his response to his disciples when they asked,

"Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:1-3).

The psalmist describes child-like trust very beautifully in these words,

**Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;
Like a weaned child rests against his mother,
My soul is like a weaned child within me (Ps 131:2).**

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