

*Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—3 "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." 4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

### **GIVING HONOR TO THOSE WHO DESERVE HONOR**

#### **Why we don't like pictures of "honor"**

We still get a newspaper. Social media might tell you a lot, but it is programmed basically to tell you what you want to hear. Nothing keeps you up to date with the local community like the local newspaper. But some mornings, when I go out early and look at the front page under the glow of the streetlight, I get confused. My eyes do two things with a newspaper. First, they look at the front-page picture, then they read the bold-faced headline. When the paper is folded in half, often the bold-faced headline announces some gruesome crime, and right below it is a picture of families at the county fair or a ribbon cutting at a new school. What's going on? Once you unfold the thing, you can see that the two weren't meant to go together. But the first impression is a picture and message that don't match.

It can happen to the church bulletin too. Part of putting together the weekly bulletin is finding the picture for the front cover. Many weeks, most weeks, it takes a matter of minutes. Through the annual gift of a member, we have access to a subscription service that specializes in church bulletin graphics.

It didn't work this week. I suppose, to the person in the pew, it seems trivial, but these are the sorts of things that trouble pastors. I wanted a picture to match with the words of our sermon text. I wanted a graphic that quoted the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother." So I searched the web site, and there it is: "Honor your father and mother" spread across delightful pictures—pictures of smiling children riding piggy-back on dad, pictures of moms giving big hugs to little ones, pictures of young families playing in the park. These beautiful pictures bring a smile to the face. Great bulletin covers.

In a society concerned about appearances, sometimes we forget about the message. Gradually I realized that none of those pictures are pictures of "Honor your father and mother." Oh, they look nice. Lots of smiles—who doesn't want smiles. And I hope that the family you grew up in *did* look like that. And I pray that your family *does* look like that. But those are not pictures of "Honor your father and mother."

What does "Honor your father and mother" look like? Here's a picture: a twelve-year old rolling the trashcan out to the corner—probably not smiling. (But you can't sell bulletin covers with trash cans full of trash on them.) "Honor your father and mother" is a teen-ager getting an iced tea for dad or mom after a tough day at work. "Honor your father and mother" might even be cleaning out the eaves troughs for parents entering their third decade of retirement. These are not smiling-families-in-the-park pictures. These are not pictures you can use to make money in the bulletin selling business. But they are, for people who like pictures and messages to match, they are good pictures for "Honor your father and your mother."

So, why don't they have bulletin covers of what it *really* means to honor parents? I am not questioning the motives of the bulletin producers. I don't think there is a bulletin printer conspiracy to overthrow life as we know it. Why is it that *all* of us would rather have a bulletin cover with junior riding dad piggy-back instead of a youngster taking out trash, even though God's message is "Honor

your parents”)? Because smiles help us imagine that everybody gets what they want, even when you honor your parents. That honoring parents is an effortlessly simple and fun thing to do.

But there is something deep down in us that makes us want to stand straight as a rail as soon as we are told to bow. Deep down we resent authority, at least any authority that won't let us have what we want. Which is the problem with parents, and that is the reason God needs to remind us, **“Children, obey your parents... Honor your father and mother.”** Yes, we like it when others smile, but most of all we want to smile. And the first people we run up against who are more concerned that we turn out right than happy are our parents.

Watch the two-year-old who doesn't get an ice cream bar until she eats her brusselsprouts, and you soon find out who is No. 1 in that toddler's life. Parents are in authority for a reason, and God wants it that way. Obviously, as verse 4 makes clear, parents do not exploit or embitter their children, **“Do not exasperate your children”** (4), but that is for another time.

### **Giving Honor**

The first words of our reading explain it about as undemocratically as possible, **“Children, obey your parents.”** Yep, children, obey. Obey. Obey when you are 2. Obey when you are 8. Obey when you are 12. Obey when you are 16? (Now we are getting some question marks.) Obey when I'm 20? Obey when I'm 30? The Bible doesn't say that, does it. It says, **“Children, obey.”** It is talking about kids. Phew! So when does someone stop being a child and get out of obeying parents? Good question. I don't have the answer, and the Bible doesn't say when it happens either. Of course we could turn to the ever-wise laws of our land which say, “The day you turn 18 you stop being a child and you start being an adult.” Yes, our laws are wise beyond even beyond the Bible because God's word never had the wisdom to figure out the exact day when people stop being children and start being adults.

But maybe the Bible might just be wiser than our laws. God's word doesn't try to say when you stop being an obedient child. But it does say this, **“Honor your father and your mother.”** When you are four, you honor your parents by bringing mom flowers and making a card for Dad's birthday, but most of all by obeying. Flowers and card can't make any four-year-old's parents happy if there is no obedience. But at age 25, the commandment still reads the same, **“Honor your father and mother”** just like Jesus told those grown men in the Gospel reading. You might be four years into your profession, married with a child and a second on the way. You still get the flowers and write the card. But no longer do parents tell you how to clean up your room. No longer is that their authority. But you still honor them. The “honoring” keeps going when you are 67 and your mother 91 and you realize that sadly, she is no longer with-it enough to even know your name on most days. Of course, obedience is no longer the issue. But there you are, still honoring her: listening to her worries, being sure that her care-givers are giving care, still bringing the flowers and the cards.

You see, honor is more than obedience, more than love. Honor is a submissiveness, a humility before another. It means a realization that someone else gets the better seat, their choice of drink. It means I go out of my way for them, give more weight to their opinions. Honor means that when I am under their direct authority, I will obey. And later when I am not, I will still consider them worthy of respect, and my care.

God says to children, **“Obey your parents,”** but to all of us, **“Honor your father and mother.”** What that means in a given situation will become obvious when you stand back and ask yourself this question, “Am I honoring my parents?”

Obedience to this commandment bears fruit. It carries God's own promise – the only commandment to carry an explicit promise in it – **“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”** Even as you think to yourself, “But I don't want to,” God says, simply

honor and I will bless you. And so even the smallest child can know that they do a God-pleasing thing. It is not left to adults or pastors to do things that God loves. Even the smallest child who submits to parents *“in the Lord,”* pleases God.

### **Honor All in Authority**

But the commandment reaches farther than that. How children are taught to respect the first authority figures of life forms a pattern for how they relate to authority throughout their life. Children who learn how God wants them to honor their parents, will learn how to interact with all authority in a God-pleasing way. We believe, as the Bible puts it, *“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities”* (Romans 13:1).

As we must honor our parents, so in other areas of life. God desires that we submit to our superiors in the workplace, that we honor leaders within this church, that we obey the laws of the land and respect our leaders. It doesn't take long for this to start to grate on us. It turns out that while we like children to be obedient, when we grow up, we like to imagine that grown-ups have no such obligations, especially for those with whom we disagree. Not at all! In fact, as we grow, there are a whole host of God-ordained authority figures in our lives—and sometimes we don't agree with them! And sometimes we're not sure they really are that concerned for us. It is still ours to honor them.

The Old Testament reading made that clear. In 1 Samuel 24 we heard of the well-known Bible figure who would one day become King David. He was not yet, but was being pursued by his king, King Saul. King Saul, out of nothing but jealousy, tried to kill David numerous times. One day the tables were turned. Saul was alone in a cave, unaware that David was in the same cave. David had the chance to finish off the man who had destroyed his happiness, his life. His friends urged him, “It's not revenge, but simple self-defense, right?!” David would not. He rebuked his companions and said, *“The LORD forbid that I should... lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD.”* Later, after Saul had safely left the cave and marched down the road, David spoke. *“David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He said to Saul... ‘My lord the king!...Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you.’”* This commandment is not only for children. We never outgrow it. It isn't just about parents!

But how often don't we hear, “I can't respect an elected official who does that, who said that.” That doesn't matter in God's book. Would your children get the impression when you talk about political figures whether in this administration or the last, that even if you don't agree, you still have respect for them? Would your neighbor get the impression that you honor those in authority at work, in city hall, in church? God never said, “Honor, except when...” He said, “Honor.”

How far should that go? Watch Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane pray out as he goes to the cross for your sins, *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”* (Mt 26:36). Listen to Jesus as he speaks to even a corrupt high priest and Roman governor far more concerned about politics than justice; he insults them not one time. Listen to Jesus as he dies, honoring and caring for his mother even at the cross. Let him remind you that honoring your father and mother and others in authority does not always make us smile, but it is God's desire. As we look at our Savior Jesus saving us, submitting himself to such authority, it inspires us to submit ourselves to authority, to give them honor. We know that God is pleased, not when we obey because it works for us, but when we obey because it is what he wants from us.

*“Honor your father and your mother”* might not be a picture of fun games and big smiles. I just couldn't bring myself to put those on the bulletin. But it can be pictured with a rainbow because God has promised, *“that it may go well with you and you may live long on the earth.”* Amen.