

## *Healthy Attitude Toward Parents and Parenting* *Exodus 20:12*

Everyone has parents and many of us either are parents or some day will become parents. The parent-child relationship is one of the most profound and important relationships in life. I have watched a new mom with a week-old baby. I have watched a nine-year-old play baseball as if his dad were the only spectator in the stands. I have heard a woman of nearly 100 years cry out for her Mamma from her nursing home bed. I have witnessed the grief of children burying their parents and parents burying their children.

Some of us speak of our parents as if they were gods. Others of us speak of our parents as if they were devils. Some of us define our lives with delight in our children. Others of us have children who have broken our hearts.

Let there be no doubt that a healthy Christian attitude toward parents and parenting is one of the most important in life. These attitudes shape many of the rest of our attitudes of life including our attitude toward God.

The place to begin a healthy attitude is with the values of God, and God greatly values families. When God created humans in his own likeness he placed Adam and Eve in a set-up to build a family. It was part of God's original design. He did not want his human creatures to be alone. When God distilled the essence of the Old Testament law into Ten Commandments he put the command to honor your parents right in the middle—the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. To him parents and parenting were among the most important values of all. When God sent his one and only Son from heaven to earth he put him into a human family with a mom and a dad to take care of him. When God chose from all the names and relationships in our human vocabulary to describe himself he chose to be called “Father”. And when families fail, God steps in. We read in Psalm 68:5, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of wid-

*ows, is God in his holy dwelling.”*

God created the family with parents and children as the basic structure of human nurture and of lasting relationships. There is a sense in which it could not be more important. That said, we can all immediately think of families gone wrong—dysfunction; divorce; death. But just because families are not ideal does not mean that the concept is not a good one. We understand that eyes are to see and ears are to hear, but just because someone is blind or deaf does not mean that eyes and ears are less important. If anything, the malfunction proves the value all the more. Whenever you think of your parents or of parenting, remember that God is on your side working to make it as good as it can be.

Elisa Morgan is the president of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International. In 1999 she wrote autobiographically:

I'm probably the least likely person to head a mothering organization. I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was 5. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother.

While my mother meant well—truly she did—most of my memories are of my mothering her rather than her mothering me. Alcohol altered her love, turning it into something that wasn't love. I remember her weaving down the hall of our ranch home in Houston, Texas, glass of scotch in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure that I was asleep. I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work.

Sure, there were good times like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong.

***We should be the very best parents we can be to please God and to increase the odds for our children to turn out well. But there are no guarantees!***

Ten years ago, when I was asked to consider leading MOPS International, a vital ministry that nurtures mothers, I went straight to my knees—and then to my therapist’s office. How could God use me—who had never been mothered—to nurture other mothers?

The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering—“*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” (II Corinthians 12:9)

What made the difference? God made the difference because God values families. God steps in to stop abuse and dysfunction that would otherwise spread from generation to generation.

A healthy Christian attitude toward parents and parenting begins with a clear conviction that God values families. Next, is the realization that parents are not perfect.

My own thought journey on parents and parenting has been like many others. As a young child I thought my parents were perfect because I didn’t know any better. When I became a young adult I saw my parents’ imperfections as I had never seen them before and I resolved that if I ever became a parent I would be a far better parent than they were. Then I became a parent. I considered myself to be a perfect parent until our children started behaving in ways that surprised me. The older I get the more keenly I am aware of my own parental failures and the more tolerant and understanding I am of my parents.

One young mother of a preschooler was near the point of total frustration with her little girl’s misbehavior. I think her daughter was officially classified as a preschool terrorist. One day the mom told her daughter that if she kept behaving like this someday God would punish her by giving her a misbehaving daughter just like her. The little girl thought for a moment and then said, “Wow, Mom, you must have been awful when you were my age!”

Each generation tends to blame its problems on the next generation. Some of the blame is justified. Parents influence almost every aspect of our lives. They give us language, values, culture and, some-

times, strange ideas. Often they don’t know what they are doing and don’t know what they have done.

One of the most painful experiences of some adults’ lives is when they confront a parent over some distant misbehavior that has profoundly impacted life only to learn that the parent does not remember anything about it.

I remember reading an Ann Landers column in which a writer complained about the bad influence her mother had on her for the first ten years of her life. Ann replied that the writer had 20 years since then to make her own decisions and to quit blaming her mother.

The truth is probably somewhere in between. Mothers do significantly influence us for all of our lives, but we are still responsible for our own response to whatever our mother’s influence may have been. Some of us have terrible mothers and choose to be different. Some have wonderful mothers and choose to reject their high values. The choice is ours and so is the ultimate responsibility.

***As children, both young and old, we need to judge our parents appropriately. There are no perfect parents. Our parents were figuring things out as they were doing them. Parenting is ongoing and dynamic. Some parenting is good and some is bad.***

There is another side to parental imperfection. Some of us as parents beat up on ourselves because we know our failures all too well. We blame the problems our children face on mistakes we made while they were growing up. If we had prayed for them more, if we had taken them to church or had put them in a different school—if we had somehow been better parents then they would not have made the decisions that have gotten them into so much trouble. They would not have formed the relationships that have been so destructive. They would not have taken the drugs that became so addictive. They would not have distanced themselves so far from the God whom we had hoped they would follow.

I do not minimize in any way the pain this causes moms and dads. But parents must realize

that all their children's problems in life are not because of them. Our children make their own choices. Some very good parents have very bad children. Some very bad parents have very good children. We should be the very best parents we can be to please God and to increase the odds for our children to turn out well. But there are no guarantees!

Earlier I said there are no perfect parents. Actually, there was one once. A perfect parent in a perfect place with totally messed up kids. That parent was God. The perfect home was Eden. The kids were Adam and Eve. You see, not even perfect parents have perfect children!

So what is the point of all this? When it comes to parents and parenting remember that we are all sinners. We do our best and we trust God, but we make a whole catalog of mistakes. So, if you are a parent, cut yourself some slack. And if your parents messed up, forgive them.

All parents need forgiveness. Forgiving is a healthy thing to do. It is the Christian thing to do. Forgiving is one of the most powerful tools in the toolbox for building healthy attitudes. Colossians 3:8 says, "*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" Or, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.*"

Sometimes the sins of our parents that we need to forgive are small. My grandfather's name was Charles Anderson; my father was named Charles Anderson. When I was about eight years old I heard my father speaking publicly to a large audience say that he didn't like the name Charles, that no one should be named Charles. Then he said, "I wouldn't name a dog Charles." My middle name is Charles.

So what am I supposed to do with that? Change my name? Buy a dog and name the dog Charles? Blame every warped part of my personality on my father's words? Or, forgive him and let it go? I decided to forgive him and break the cycle. None of our children are named Charles!

Some of us need to forgive our parents for big things. Paul Hegstrom wrote a book called *Broken*

*Children, Grown Up Pain*. He begins the book with his autobiography, a story filled with awful pain. He describes how he became an angry, controlling, unstable, abusive man. He moved often. He abused his wife starting the day after they were married in high school. He divorced her without telling her. She found out when she unpacked a box following a move and found inside the box their divorce decree. She was living with him at the time. She had no idea she was divorced from him.

His life was a wreck. He traces the start of his problems back to when he was nine years old and one day asked his mother what would happen if his friend Tommy was molested by an older man. Here is what he wrote:

*...if you are a parent, cut yourself some slack. ...if your parents messed up, forgive them.*

My mother immediately washed my mouth out with soap and reprimanded me for even asking about sex. I wouldn't make that mistake again. But 'Tommy' wasn't the child with the problem . . . I was

the one who had been sexually molested. As a child, I was in no way equipped to deal with my loss of innocence, and I immediately lost my sense of safety, my trust in my parents, and every ounce of self-worth a nine-year-old could have.

Some sins of parents are easy to forgive and sometimes it is a very long process. But there is an indescribable power to forgiving—it is as good for or better for the forgiver than it is for the one that is forgiven. It is a way to let go of anger and hatred and resentment. It is a way to move on with a healthy life. Most of all, it is a way to be like God.

The fifth commandment in Exodus 20:12 says, "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*" Honoring parents does not necessarily mean agreeing with them or endorsing what they have done. It is possible to honor and forgive our parents and at the same time make a very clear distinction that their behavior was inappropriate and sinful. We sometimes say that God loves the sinner and hates the sin and we can do exactly the same thing. Just as God's love for sinners leads to forgiveness, so our love for our parents should lead to

forgiveness. You may be an adult whose parents are older or have died. To obey God and to have a healthy attitude, you can still forgive them even if they can never acknowledge the forgiveness that you give.

This biblical principle equally applies to children. Just as all children need to forgive their parents, so all parents need to forgive their children. In fact, apologizing to our children and asking their forgiveness is a significant lesson to teach them how to forgive and have a healthy attitude toward mom and dad.

Although the list for having a healthy attitude toward parents and parenting could be far longer, let's add just one more for today. It is that God loves our children. Actually, God loves our children more than we love our children. And God wants the best for our children more than we do. We can read about this in Matthew 19:13-15:

*... little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.*

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

But it isn't just little children God loves. The whole point of the Bible is that God loved us and our children so much that he gave his one and only Son. If God loves our children enough to sacrifice his Son, then we need never doubt that he is completely and irrevocably committed to the greatest good in their lives.

There is no one in my life I have prayed for more than our four children. I love them and want the best for them. I prayed for them before they were born, I have prayed for them all of their lives so far and I will pray for and love them until the day I die. But, I must tell you that I find great joy and comfort and hope in knowing that God loves them more than I do. God wants good for them far more than I want good for them. They are his children far more than they are my children.

Why is all this so important? It is because family relationships impact every part of our lives. Healthy attitudes toward parents and parenting foster healthy Christian attitudes throughout the rest of us.

But there is another very important reason. Our family attitudes often shape our attitudes and relationships toward God. Those with good attitudes toward fathers on earth have good attitudes toward our Father in heaven. Those who carry bitterness, resentment and alienated relationships with family here often struggle to have a positive relationship with God and with other Christians.

I am not suggesting that we have to fix family relationships in order to be right with God. To the contrary, I suggest we get right with God to have healthy Christian attitudes toward our parents and families. It is for that very reason that I pray for you and for your family. . .

God, our Father,

Thank you for showing us what a truly good Parent is like. Thank you for loving us so fully and unconditionally. Thank you for forgiving us so generously.

Thank you for our families—for our parents and for our children. Fill us with gratitude for all your blessings and fill us with faith for all our concerns.

Shape our attitudes and bless our relationships. We are all children whether we are young or old. Help us to honor our parents as a way to honor you. And, for all of us who now have or will someday have children, make us the best parents we can be. May we be just like you!

We ask for your blessing, our Father, in the name of your Son.

Amen.

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