

Parents — Always to be Honored

Last week I talked with a young woman whose mother died just about two years ago from cancer. She told me that recently she was going through a scrapbook that belonged to her mother and while looking at the pictures and reflecting on the memories, a letter fell out. Her mother had written the letter to her daughter from her hospital bed and for reasons unknown the daughter had never received it and was reading it for the first time. She explained to me that the letter was long and while she didn't tell me all that it said in it, there was one part that obviously really grabbed her. In it her mother, writing from her hospital bed, asked where her daughter had been the previous two days and why she had not come to visit her. The daughter told me that she couldn't remember what she was doing those two days or why she didn't go to the hospital. She told me that she would give just about anything to have those two days back again, so that she could one more time be with the mother whom she still loved and whom she very much misses.

Her story impressed me about the importance of our relationships — between parents and children, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. The relationships begin even before a child is born and last even after a parent has died. Her story impressed me, not because she missed out on a couple of days at the hospital — that really didn't much matter at all. I could sense in her voice, in the things she said, the feelings she expressed, how important her mother was to her and I thought to myself how much she honored her mother even though she has been gone for a couple of years.

Her story impressed me as a fulfillment of one of the ten commandments: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." Now I count that just about everybody

who is here this morning should be included on a list of those who honor their parents. Your presence here at church on Mother's Day morning shows that. But honoring parents is more than just sitting with them in church on Mother's Day or making one of a hundred ten million long-distance phone calls that AT&T predicts will happen today on its busiest day of the year. It's not just a card or a gift, it's much more than that.

To honor parents means to follow their God. For example, take David who lived a thousand years before Jesus. David was a king, a poet, a musician, a politician, a military leader and a man who was said to have a heart for God. He was so great that 3000 years later we all know someone named after him. At the end of his

life David spoke his last will and testament. Being a king, he had secretaries there who wrote down everything

that he had to say and so we have a record of his actual words. He left everything to his son Solomon who was reputed to become the wisest man who ever lived. He left to him his entire kingdom and his huge wealth, but there was one thing more important than anything else. David told his son Solomon:

Acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. (1 Chronicles 28:9)

More important to David than anything else was that his son follow after his God.

Now I know that many of us here today are the children of godly parents. That's not to say we had perfect fathers or mothers; I'm sure they

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all made mistakes. But for many of us, our parents' greatest desire was not to leave their sons or daughters the house or the business or a fortune. Their greatest desire was that their children wholeheartedly follow after Jesus Christ. If you are counted among those who honor father and mother — if you really take that seriously — then following their God is about as important as any matter can be.

If you are here this morning sitting by your godly parent, I know what they are thinking. Their hearts are pounding with the hope that you are listening. They want more than anything else that you will be a disciple of Jesus Christ not only in faith but also in practice. They want your life to be the kind of life that honors God in all that you do. They want you to follow their God.

Solomon didn't. He succeeded financially. He had so much money that he actually had to have warehouses built so that he could store it. There were ambassadors and monarchs that came from distant lands in other continents just to see his architecture, just to take a look at everything that he had. He succeeded politically, expanding his kingdom to become one of the world powers of his day. The nation of Israel was larger under King Solomon than it ever was before or has ever been since. He was wise. Many of the proverbs that we quote today originally came from the lips of Solomon, this wise man. Isn't it strange that he was so wise and yet he did not fully follow his father's God?

If you want to honor your parents, follow their God — and forgive their sins. That seems like a strange combination, but parents are sinners. You know that. In fact, if there is any relationship where the fact that we are sinners shows up, it's at home. You can get all dressed up and put on a facade for strangers for limited periods of time. You can go to work for eight hours and maybe fool the people that are around

you during the day, but at home it's an impossibility. At home within the walls of your marriage and family, the fact that we are sinners is simply no secret.

Parenting is such an interesting journey. When we are little children we look up to our parents and think that they are perfect. We write them notes that say: "To the best Mom in all of the world" and Mom delights in that and puts it up on the refrigerator and thinks, "Oh, I hope he never finds out." Or, "To the most wonderful Dad that there is." But along comes adolescence and it sometimes becomes the other extreme where only faults can be found and the alienation between parents and children is as stressful and far apart as it can be. Then we arrive at adulthood and often become parents ourselves. One of the first thoughts of those who are going to become parents is to say, "I'm going to get it right. I'm not going to do it the way my mother and father did it." And so the whole cycle begins all over again for we quickly discover that we are no more perfect, nor that much better parents, than the generations of parents before us.

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There are no perfect parents. The question is what a child should do about the sins of his or her

imperfect parents. There is not a one of us who can't reflect back on childhood and remember a time when we were offended or hurt by our parents. We remember if we have brothers and sisters that sometimes there was favoritism, perhaps a lifetime pattern of favoritism. Sometimes harsh words or punishment crushed your young spirit. Sometimes the sins of parents are so unspeakable that their children try to forget them. What's a child to do then?

The honorable thing to do is to forgive. In Colossians 3:13 God tells us, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." There is a supernatural power to

forgiveness. When we forgive other people we are more like God than I suppose at any other time. To forgive is to let go. It's to say that we don't hold on to the grievance any longer. To forgive a debt is to say, "I will never ask you to pay it back again." And to forgive an offense or hurt is to say that we will never seek revenge; we will never hold it against that person; we will never make that person have to pay.

So much for the theory of forgiveness, but what about the practice of it? Is there something that comes to your mind for which you have never forgiven your parents? Would you be willing to forgive them now? Would you be willing to do as God has done for me and you, and forgive your parents? That would be a marvelous thing to do for them, for you and for God. It is a fabulous way to honor parents — to forgive their sins and to hear their wisdom.

Wisdom is a wonderful thing. It's sometimes confused with knowledge but they are not at all the same. Knowledge is data — it's information. Wisdom is how to use that information and data.

We live at a time when human knowledge is said to double every seventeen days which means that our human race knows twice as much as we did two and one-half weeks ago. But wisdom has not kept up. We live in a world that has all of this data and information but is struggling to survive and to fit all of the pieces together and to make any sense of it.

Wisdom is something that comes with experience and age. Sometimes those who have made the greatest mistakes are the wisest of all. You can talk to someone who had a fortune and lost it and hear a lot of wisdom about how to handle finances. You can learn a lot about relationships from someone who had a terrific relationship and blew it away. If only we could get all the experience and expertise on life and everything else from an earlier generation and then start up where they left off! What if my

parents and grandparents could have learned all the wisdom from their parents and grandparents and then passed it along to me, so that I could take all of that accumulated wisdom, add some more to it through my own life experiences and then pass it along as a heritage to my children and grandchildren? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to do?

There are some who work hard at learning the wisdom of their parents. They sit down with parents and grandparents and ask all kinds of questions. Some even take notes or record the conversations on tape so they can be passed along as a gift to the next generation. They are honoring their parents.

But wisdom is not something you can turn off and on like a tape recorder switch. Usually it is woven like a golden thread through a lifetime of stories. Some are reluctant to tell their stories and experiences because they think no one is interested.

The academy award for the best picture of 1994 went to "Forest Gump." It's the fictional story of a disadvantaged boy who lived a life of very unlikely successes. He met presidents, was a war hero, became an international ping pong champion, made millions of dollars acci-

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dentally selling shrimp. Everything he did seemed to turn out won-

derfully right. One of the themes in the movie is his mother's unrelenting commitment to him about his success. Throughout his life he constantly quoted his mother to anyone who would listen. He would say things like, "Mama said that life is like a box of chocolates. You never quite know what you are going to get." Forest Gump wasn't very smart, but he honored his mother by listening to her wisdom.

The Old Testament book of Proverbs is a book about wisdom. Proverbs 23:22 says, "Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old." In

other words, honor your parents by listening to what they have to say. Find your father's wisdom in his stories. Don't ignore your elderly mother as though she has nothing important to say. Let us never think that we are so much smarter or wiser than those who have given us life and gone before us, for there is much to learn and great wisdom to be gained if we listen to their wisdom.

To truly honor your parents, listen to their wisdom. And express your gratitude. Gratitude is a good thing to express to anyone, not just your parents. It's so easy to take for granted those who gave us life — parents who love us no matter what we do or where we are. Parents are sometimes the least thanked of all, although they are those who have contributed the most. Just in financial terms, most children owe plenty to their parents. I don't know if you have checked the cost lately. If you're pregnant, don't listen to this, okay? The current estimate is that it costs between \$100,000 and \$200,000 to raise a child from birth to age 18. But parents invest far more than money in the lives of their children. They invest themselves, their lives, their hopes and dreams, their love, their forgiveness, their prayers. How do we repay them?

In many societies repayment comes in old age as children take care of their parents. In our country with Medicare, pensions and social security, children have in fact been devalued. In other countries having a lot of children is the guarantee that you will be cared for in your old age just as you cared for your parents and grandparents. Perhaps if the predicted demise of social security comes to America we will return to the old ways or other societies' ways.

I Timothy 5:4 explains a powerful Christian principle:

If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing

to God.

That's not just a principle for the first century but for now as well. Widowed parents are not to be reckoned as burdens who crimp our lifestyle but as gifts from God that are to be appreciated with gratitude and care. The proof of our religion is not just in what we believe but in what we do. Honoring our parents can be as simple as looking them in the eye and saying, "Thank you," or writing a letter of thanks, or speaking gratitude to other people today about a parent that might have died decades ago. Or it may go so far as providing life-long care for the parents or grandparents who gave us life.

If you agree with God that parents are to be honored, what could you do to honor them? Whether they are living or dead, distant or near, worthy or not, what *will* you do?

I suggest that you follow their God, forgive their sins, hear their wisdom, express your gratitude and do what God commanded long ago:

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Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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