

FAMILY MATTERS 6

“The Children’s Role”

After discussing the Father’s Role and the Mother’s Role these past 2 weeks; this morning we take up the case of the Child’s Role in the family system. Many kids often feel their only role is to take out the trash and do the dishes, while many parents would often like to subscribe to Mark Twain’s philosophy of parenting: “When a kid turns thirteen, stick him in a barrel, nail the lid on top, and feed him through the knot hole. When he turns sixteen...plug up the knot hole.” We know that plan will never work. Not because family services wouldn’t approve, but who of us raising teenage boys could ever imagine getting them enough food through one little knot hole?

In recent days we’ve seen and heard about the extremes haven’t we? We’re watching with baited interest the unfolding drama of a single mom with 6 kids already; giving birth to 8 more! Yes, 8 more...14 kids under the age of 8! We’re also watching with tragic interest the case of a young 18 year old mom who has been accused of neglecting her infant to...death...right here in Bismarck.

As tough as it is to be a parent these days...it’s no picnic being a child either. There is so much about life that doesn’t yet make sense, there are so many rules, there are so many pressures, there are so many temptations, there are so many roles to be explored and chosen...it’s not easy being a child or a teenager these days. With all that in mind, it’s time we discover what God says about the role of being a child in the family system. Thus our scripture:

Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. “Honor your father and mother,” This is the first commandment with a promise: If you honor your father and mother, “things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth.” Ephesians 6:1-3

In this section of Ephesians where we've been discovering the various roles of husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers, comes these 3 verses directed toward children and their role in the family. There are basically 2 commands listed here: obey your parents and honor your parents. Many people have used those two words interchangeably, and there is some sense of that; but I want to separate them for our consideration today. I believe the two words, obey and honor are different, and apply to different times in our lives. We'll begin by considering Obedience:

1. OBEDIENCE IS A LEARNED BEHAVIOR. IT'S LEARNED THROUGH THE SETTING AND ENFORCING OF GOOD RULES

Obedience is one of those difficult things all of us have to learn. From childhood to being a student, to becoming an adult; and especially in the spiritual realm; obedience is a fundamental behavior that all of us must master. That being said...I believe this behavior is best learned when we are young children.

The nature with which we are born is not automatically obedient, it is a learned behavior. Call it the "sin nature" or the "human nature" or something worse, but most of us at least were born selfish, self-centered, and full of self-will. There is one word you will never have to teach your children: MINE! Therefore, it goes against everything we are and know to actually lend, give or agree to be obedient to another...it is a learned behavior. As such, the best school for learning obedience is in the home, in the early years. It's a difficult endeavor.

Gary Chapman in his book we've mentioned a couple times already; highlights part of the problem:

We live in an increasingly egalitarian culture where everyone is presumed to have the same "rights." Respect for authority, whether in the workplace, at school, or in the church, has ebbed as people have become more cynical about their leaders.

Beyond societal influences, today's busy, tired parent often finds it easier to let little Jacob or Caitlin stay up as late as they want, eat all the junk food they desire, and generally have his/her own way! Along comes the Christian, "prude", parent who chooses to assist God in the teaching and training of children, and you see part of the rub.

If this behavior is learned...how is it learned? Well, there are probably a hundred answers, but one essential one. Obedient behavior is learned through the setting and enforcing of good rules. And what are good rules?

Good rules have 5 components: A- They are intentional. They have been given conscience thought. They are not thrown out in moments of parental rage or anger, but thought out in the prayer-rooms and private discussions between moms and dads. B- They are mutual. They have been discussed by both moms and dads, and agreed upon even when compromise was necessary. C- They are reasonable. Reasonable rules serve a positive function; creating healthy children and family systems. D- They are understood. Having rules no one understands or remembers makes no sense. Good rules are understood by both parent and child. E- They are enforced. Good rules are quickly and fairly enforced.

It has been said that obedience is best learned by suffering the loving and thoughtful consequences of disobedience. Consequences should match the rule as closely as possible. If staying out later than curfew is violated because the car took Jane or Johnny to far from home; then restrictions on the car might be an appropriate consequence. If swearing is not allowed in your home or from your child; the old bar of soap punishment, does actually fit the crime! So, if obedience is a learned behavior for especially younger children, then honor is more fitting for older children, and we turn to that discussion now.

2. HONOR IS A LEARNED ATTITUDE. IT IS LEARNED THROUGH SETTING AND MODELING A GOOD EXAMPLE

Obedience precedes Honor. Toddlers are not very capable of honoring parents; their world still revolves too much around their own ego. They are not mentally or emotionally or developmentally able to understand or practice Honor. I do not mean that they are unaware of the presence of parents, but the focus of their minds is on getting their own needs met and exploring their own desires. They can observe honorable behavior, they can be taught honorable behaviors, but it's not until kids get a bit older do they begin to understand the concept of honor. They are fully capable of learning obedience, but the capacity to honor comes later in childhood.

Honor defined is really the expression of respect or giving esteem. It is recognizing the importance of someone and seeking to express love and devotion to that person. To honor someone is to draw attention to that person's character. In the Greek and Hebrew languages of the Bible the words for honor literally meant: "heavy" "weighty." we might say "to lay on them respect or give them worth." Today it's more often taken it to mean flattery. But honor in God's word meant "I weigh you down with respect and prestige. I place upon you great worth and value."

Here's an example of one young person's attempt to honor his parents: (play youtube video: (The way to happiness video: honor and help your parents.)

I think that in order to truly honor parents, a child must come to understand something of the nature of right and wrong, and, of sacrifice and love. Not until a child is capable of understanding that his/her parents are trying to do the right things for them and the family; will they be able to offer them honor.

I know there are many dysfunctional families that contain abusive or addicted parents who have no personal sense of right or wrong, but not until a child comes to understand the difference, will they be able or interested in offering honor to a parent.

I know this has been a sticky point for many teens, who have parents that are not yet believers. Should a child obey and honor a parent who is not following Jesus or walking with God? Good (and not easy) question! My answer would be this: YES, we are to obey and try our best to honor our parents, even when they are screwing up, even when they are not being good examples, even when they are not living as we know God would have them...we should obey and honor them...EXCEPT when they might ask you to do something contrary to the Word or Will of God!

Honor can be cultivated in younger children. Teach them to stand when an adult enters the room, or to refrain from interrupting a parent who is having a conversation with another adult. And when they are older, those behaviors will become an attitude of behavior, and not just an obedient act.

Parents, if you want your children to honor, respect and obey you, then set them good examples. Be respectful in the ways you treat other people, especially in the ways you treat your spouse. Discover ways that make the important people in your life feel honored, and when all else fails...simply tell your children exactly what makes you feel honored. I'll never forget, and hopefully never lose the little slip of paper Adam turned in for an early grade-school assignment that stated: When I grow up I want to be just like my dad! Man, that feels good!

Children...I know that most of you come from great and loving homes, with great parents doing a great job raising you. Please know that the most important thing you can do to fulfill your role as a child in your family is to learn to obey your parents; doing what they say, when they ask. And as you get older, remember their example, and consider the sacrifices they made to make your life...and make it better...and find ways to honor and respect your parents.

And to you children and teenagers who come from tough home environments...I want you to know that even if your parent or parents haven't figured out how to be good parents, they do still love you. Even when their behavior is wrong or inappropriate or even illegal, you don't have to honor that, but you might be surprised how actually honoring your parents for what they could become...might be a transformational experience for your family. That does not mean that you should put up with or silently endure abuse; but it does mean that no matter your family situation, God still loves you, and God might in fact be preparing you to reach your parents with the love of God!

I'll make one more suggestion as we close. True honor is a matter of the heart... it is an attitude of life...it is a practice that continues to grow and mature as do we. In our early days of following God, we're usually taken up with questions of obedience or disobedience. As we grow and mature, the question evolves from obedience to honor. How can I live my life today in ways that will honor God? It's not that we stop obeying, it's just that we grow into a deeper level of relationship that involves and includes honor. You see...it's a family matter.

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Good Rules:

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