

Parenting

After a long hiatus, it seemed appropriate to return with an issue related to the primary reason for that hiatus. You may recall that our younger daughter was involved in a serious car wreck in May and that I hoped it would serve as a wake-up call for a life that was spinning out of control (see [God Moves in a Mysterious Way](#)). Indications initially seemed positive, and we flew her home in an air ambulance to complete her recovery. But despite the love and care we and her church family here showed her, she ended up rejecting it all to follow her own desires. The details are neither important nor appropriate here, but while our daughter was well on the way to a physical recovery, she didn't think she needed rehab and has left to return to Arkansas under circumstances that are certainly far from ideal.

One common piece of advice writers get is to write from their own experiences, but the danger here is that our recent history may cloud my judgment. With that caveat, I wanted to share some thoughts about parenting.

Then

There are hundreds of scriptures relevant to parenting. One entire book (Proverbs), in fact, is essentially a parenting manual and, more importantly, the entire Bible is about the family of God. There are, however, five or six passages that stand out in my mind when I think about parenting. The first is one of the 10 commandments:

Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the LORD your God gives you. (Deuteronomy 5:16)

As Paul observes, "this is the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2) and Jesus reinforced this commandment on at least two occasions during His ministry--once in pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matthew 15:4, Mark 7:10) and once in teaching the "rich young ruler" (Matthew 19:19, Mark 10:19, Luke 18:20). Paul calls for children to "be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. (Colossian 3:20) and places disobedient children along side murderers, liars, and gossips, calling such things "*worthy of death*" in his Romans 1 description of sinful unbelievers. In his final extant letter, he again highlights disobedient children:

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (2 Timothy 3:1-7)

It is certain that the early church taught the importance of honoring parents. But what really does it mean to honor parents? Since the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, is ultimately all about the family of God, and because Scripture frequently relates the relationship of believers to God with that of children to parents, honoring parents is comparable to honoring God, which Paul describes in several passages, most notably in his prayer for the church in Thessalonica: "*To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (2 Thessalonians 1:10-11)

But as much as the Bible dictates these responsibilities of children toward parents, Scripture puts an even greater emphasis on parents' responsibilities toward their children—

Responsibility for their training:

Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

Responsibility for their physical welfare:

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:8)
...children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. (2 Corinthians 12:14b)

And responsibility for their attitude toward authority (God):

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4) and *Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart* (Colossians 3:21).

These verses are undoubtedly the favorites of defiant children in the face of discipline, but they are nonetheless a sobering warning for heavy-handed fathers (and mothers).

Paul underscores the importance he places in the paternal responsibilities by listing "*keeping his children under control with all dignity*" as a characteristic of elders and deacons, reasoning that one who cannot manage his own family is unlikely to be able to oversee the family of God (see 1 Timothy 3:1-13).

The early church continued to stress the importance of parental, particularly paternal, instruction of children:

"You shall not remove your hand from your son or from your daughter. Rather, from their youth, you shall teach them the fear of God." (The Didache, ca. 100)

"It is a failing not to restrain the faults of slaves and children. If they escape without punishment, they will go on to greater evils. In this instance, anger is not to be restrained." (Lactantius, ca. 310) By lumping slaves and children together, Lactantius may be illustrative of adult attitudes toward children in his time.

"You fathers, educate your children in the Lord. Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord...Do not be afraid to reprove them and to teach them wisdom with severity. For your corrections will not kill them; rather, they will preserve them..." (Apostolic Constitutions, ca. 390)

Concern for parental responsibilities was also not confined to the church. The Roman family was highly paternalistic, and wives and children had few rights. The *patria potestas* (father's power) gave the father virtually absolute control over his descendants—he could even kill a child whose behavior displeased him although such severe (and final) discipline was rare. Many Romans were certainly unknowing adherents of the fifth commandment, but they often lacked the restraint counseled by Paul, even though some Romans pointed out the need for balance in parenting:

It is of utmost importance that children be raised in the correct manner even if this means harsh discipline. We must be careful not to allow them to have fits of rage, but we must also be careful not to stifle their individual personalities...Unlimited freedom creates an intractable personality, total repression produces an adject personality. Praise lifts the spirit and makes a child self-confident, but too much praise makes him insolent and bad-tempered. We must therefore steer a middle course when raising a child." (Seneca the Younger, a contemporary of Paul)

Mothers, on the other hand, played a relatively small role in the discipline of children, particularly sons:

Don't you see now father treat their children one way, and mothers another way? Fathers order their children to be woken up to do their work early... But mothers want to hold their children on their laps and keep them in the cool shade; they want them never to be unhappy, never to weep, and never to be in distress. (also Seneca the Younger).

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26)

This passage has troubled many readers, even from the earliest days of Christianity. Clement of Alexandria (c. 195), for example wrote:

"Now, the God of peace, who also exhorts us to love our enemies, does not introduce hatred and dissolution from those who are dearest to us. But if we are to love our enemies, it is in accordance with right reason that, ascending from them, we should also love those nearest in kinship. Or, if we are to hate our blood-relations, reason teaches us that we are to hate our enemies even more."

Luke 14:26 is one of the favorite passages of skeptics. "Look!" they exclaim. "Your hero preaches hatred." The problem is that they are applying the kind of absolute literalism they often criticize in fundamentalists. The Bible sometimes uses extreme and hyperbolic language typical of ancient cultures (see also Genesis 29:30-31; Luke 16:13). The clear meaning of Luke 14:26 is "If anyone comes to Me, and I don't matter more to him than his own father and mother and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." That Clement was compelled to explain that Christians are to love their families demonstrates that even in his day there were those who took Jesus' words to an extreme.

But what if our family members are living in rebellion to God? Are we justified in hating them? Certainly not! In some sense, at least, rebellious children are enemies and we are taught to love our enemies. Loving them does not, of course, mean

accepting their behavior; in fact, what more powerful expression of hate could there be than to accept behavior that leads to eternal destruction? In this case, love demands strong rejection of the behavior, just as Paul taught the church in Corinth concerning their boastful acceptance of an immoral man in their midst. In telling the Corinthians to expel this man from their midst, he writes that he has "*decided to deliver such a one to Satan*" (1 Corinthians 5:5a). Such strong judgment must have shocked some Corinthians as much as it shocks Christians today.

"Wouldn't it be better," many would ask, "to keep someone with us so we can show him love in the hope that he will repent?" Perhaps so, up to a point. Paul had apparently discerned, however, that such treatment simply would not work in this case. And it is important to recognize the purpose behind Paul's harsh judgment: "*so that his spirit may be saved*" (1 Corinthians 5:5b). Paul is willing to advocate an extreme measure (expulsion from the church) because he sees the ultimate consequence as more important. Of course, he is also concerned that the presence of such willfully sinful behavior in the church will have consequences for others, so he calls for the Corinthians to expel the man not out of "*malice and wickedness,*" but out of "*sincerity and truth*" (1 Corinthians 5:8).

It is certainly not trivial that the church is frequently referred to as a "family" and that fellow believers are "brothers and sisters." If it is necessary in extreme cases to expel someone from the family of God, is it also necessary in extreme cases to expel a child from an earthly family? There is just such an example in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. There are many details Jesus does not include in that story. How old was the son? What had the father done to deal with the son's rebellious attitude? How long had it been going on? The parable begins with the son coming to the father and demanding his inheritance, but certainly this wouldn't have come out of the blue. Dividing his estate before his death was an extreme measure for the father. Surely, he must have feared that his son would use it to fund a sinful life, so in doing so, he essentially expelled the son from his family and must have done so under duress and after attempting many other corrective measures.

I understand the pain he must have experienced in doing so!

Is there a "statute of limitations" on parenthood? I find no indication of one in scripture. When Paul describes the sinful behavior of the "last days," he includes, "*men will be...disobedient to parents...*" (2 Timothy 3:2). So biblical teaching does not put a time limit on the fifth commandment. Nor is there a time limit on parental responsibilities. All parents have a lifetime responsibility to train and provide, and when it comes to a rebellious child, discern what approaches have the best chance of leading to ultimate salvation.

Now

I heard some parenting "expert" on the radio recently suggest that a parent's job was to "help their children find themselves" and this seems to typify worldly attitudes. But such advice runs directly counter to the biblical view of humanity and, more importantly, the responsibilities of Christian parents. Rather, I believe, it is a parent's responsibility to help their children discover what God made them to be. The difference may be subtle, but it is profound.

Each of us has an inherent propensity toward sinful behavior and "finding one's self" focuses on selfishness. Done in the absence of seeking God's purpose in our lives, it

inevitably leads to sin. God made each of us individuals with specific talents (and specific weaknesses), but once we understand the sacrifice that was required to free us from the bondage of sin, we also understand that we are not free agents.

By now you have probably realized that we expelled our daughter (aged 20) from our home. We did so in the hope that it will ultimately lead to her salvation. We hope someday to learn that she has turned her life over to God

Discussion

Thank you to the many subscribers who expressed their sympathy or empathy for the struggles my wife and I have gone through with our daughter. Regrettably, but not surprisingly, a number of them shared their similar grief.

One subscriber wrote, for example:

I DO understand what you are feeling. I am just heartbroken over my (our) own 22-year-old daughter who moved 100 miles away to a new job she hates, and no longer attends the meetings of the saints, listens to rock music, drinks alcohol, watches trashy tv and tries to have relationships with non-Christians who will do nothing but bring her grief. I pray for her to realize she has left the Lord behind, after being baptized into Christ, and also will pray for your daughter. These are such severe heartaches for parents to bear.

And another:

We too have a daughter that has rejected many of the values we thought were pretty basic to health and happiness. We have a wonderful 3 year old grandson born to her out of wedlock and we do what we can to help him. We want him to have a "normal" life, but it's difficult with a mommy who doesn't live with or love daddy.

DS: Ultimately, I'm not sure if these stories encourage me because I find we're not alone, or if they discourage me because there are so many tragic stories about the children of Christian parents.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels (October 5)

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