

Honoring Parents

Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:2-3



Honoring Parents

Read Exodus 20:12. “Honor¹ your father and your mother,² so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (*Exodus 20:12, NIV*).³

📖 *Paul wrote, “Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’” (Ephesians 6:2-3, NIV)*

“Hating” Parents

While Jesus affirmed the commandment to honor parents (*Matthew 15:3-6; Mark 7:9-13*), he said some interesting things about the Christian’s relationship with his/her parents.

📖 *Jesus said, “For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:35-37, NIV)*

📖 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” (*Luke 14:26*)

1. Why did Jesus say he came to divide families?⁴ Why did Jesus tell his disciples to hate⁵ their parents and other family members?

! In this context, “hate” is a Semitic language expression that means “love less” than something or someone else. The expression concerns priority. See footnote 5.

Jesus’ statement about “hating” parents does not contradict the commandments to honor parents, but rather communicates the need to put God first in one’s life. When we put God first in our lives, we are able to honor and love our parents in even greater ways.

¹ The verb ‘honor’ means ‘to show respect for, to value, to confer honor on.’

² The commandment to honor parents was taken very seriously, and various failures to honor parents had severe consequences according to the Law (*Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 19:3a; 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 27:16*).

³ Paul notes that this commandment is ‘the first commandment with a promise’ (*Ephesians 6:2-3*). In the Old Testament context, the promise concerns Israel’s habitation in the ‘promised land’ (*cf. Deut. 4:40; 5:32-33*). In Ephesians, the promise is re-applied in a general way. As a general principle, a person’s life ‘on the earth’ benefits from honoring his/her parents; though some say the promise refers to eternal life.

⁴ Matthew 10:35-37 is preceded by, ‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword’ (10:34). (‘Sword’ is used metaphorically.) Jesus Christ is the ‘Prince of Peace’ – the one through whom we have peace with God. However, many do not receive the Prince of Peace. Many reject him and oppose his followers, resulting in division. This division affects families as well. People who become followers of Christ may be opposed or rejected by their families; and in some cases, disowned, disinherited or even killed.

⁵ Jesus is not saying that his followers should not love their parents and family members! And he is not saying they should love them less than before. Rather he is saying that they should *love God* (including God’s Son) *more* (see Matthew 10:37). “Following Jesus is to be the disciple’s ‘first love.’ This pursuit is to have priority over any family member and one’s own life...” (Darrell Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996], 1284-1285.)

Discussion Questions



2. What does “honoring parents” mean? In what ways can we honor our father and mother? What does “honoring parents” include?⁶

3. Before quoting Exodus 20:12, Paul says, “Children,⁷ obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (*Ephesians 6:1*). Does “honoring parents” always mean “obeying parents”?⁸ Does “honoring parents” necessarily mean we always do what they wish?⁹ Explain.

4. As Christians, it may be difficult to honor our parents when they oppose our faith, or oppose our decisions resulting from our faith. What kinds of conflicts can result from our decision to follow Christ and live our lives according to biblical values and instructions?

5. How can we honor our parents when there is a conflict between what they want us to do and what we believe God wants us to do? Examples include: 1) the choice of a marriage partner; 2) the choice of a career or job (which could be affected by our change in values); and 3) participation in ancestor veneration practices.¹⁰ What are other examples?

Reflection/Application

- Honoring parents is commanded by the Bible, and it is important. However, honoring God is much more important. Are you honoring God? The first step is to receive His gift of adoption into His family through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you need to trust in Jesus?
- As a Christian, can you say that you are truly honoring your parents, while at the same time honoring God? What do you need to do to show greater honor and love to your parent(s)? Maybe it is difficult to honor and love your parent(s) because of personality or relationship problems. Ask God to fill you with His love and enable you to better love your parent(s).

⁶ People will likely answer these questions differently depending on their culture. It is good for us to understand how other cultures view ‘honoring parents.’ But whatever our culture, we should compare our values and practices to the Bible’s values and instructions. In western cultures characterized by individualism, honoring parents is generally undervalued, if not neglected. In eastern cultures characterized by collectivism, honor/shame, and/or filial piety, honoring parents is more highly valued, but if honoring parents takes priority over honoring God, it is a problem.

⁷ ‘children’ (*tekna*) – likely refers to children growing up, but could include any children still living in the home.

⁸ The command to ‘obey’ applies to children still living in the parents’ home. However, ‘honoring parents’ continues throughout life. While adult children may not be commanded to ‘obey’ their parents, ‘honoring parents’ does include respecting their counsel, carefully weighing their judgment, and following their advice if at all possible (Robertson McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995], 287).

⁹ Again, our cultures will likely influence how we answer this question.

¹⁰ Much heartache has resulted from the collision of Christian conviction and family tradition, especially in cultures that highly value filial piety expressed in ancestor veneration or worship. Various Christians have suggested alternatives or substitutes to ancestor practices to communicate proper respect for parents without violating the prohibitions of Scripture. If this is an issue for you, please investigate it further. Meet with others who are facing this issue and encourage one another.