

Honor Your Father and Mother: The Roles of the Children

In our study of the Christian home, we have thus far dealt with the roles of the husband and the wife. Now I'd like to address the roles of the children.

Children have it pretty easy in terms of their biblical responsibilities. Their roles are few: God expects kids to obey and honor their parents and to learn. That's about it.

It's unfortunate that in our world, children often do none of these, or at least they do none of them well. They don't obey and honor their parents, and they often are reluctant to learn. Sometimes the parents don't require that their kids obey them. Sometimes the schools don't do a very good job of teaching or insisting that children learn. Many children in our world today are failing to fulfill God's basic expectations for them—obey and honor their parents and learn.

Sometimes children grow up in an environment where parents are dishonorable people. I am familiar with situations and I've heard stories about parents who live dishonorably, and the children merely reflect what they see at home. Children are unruly, disrespectful, and uneducated because that's what they learn at home. Their parents are dishonorable people, and the children reflect that.

Obviously, Christian homes should be different. We might expect that sort of thing from the unsaved world, but we don't expect it from children being brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We should have higher expectations for those brought up in a Christian home. No child is going to be perfect, and no family is perfect, that's for sure. But we should expect children raised in Christian homes to fulfill their basic roles. Parents should insist that children fulfill these roles.

Let's look at these three responsibilities a bit more closely.

I. Children must obey their parents.

Ephesians 6:1 *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*

Colossians 3:20 *Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.*

The Bible takes this command very seriously. In the OT, if a couple had a rebellious, disobedient child, they could take him to the elders of the city and they could stone him to death (Deut 21:18f). That's how God taught his people to deal with severe, habitual disobedience.

I don't recommend that disobedient kids be stoned to death, but I do recommend that we take disobedience seriously.

Regarding obedience, parents should teach their children several things.¹

- A. Teach children to obey quickly. Teach your children to obey right away.
1. Children should understand that their parents expect them to obey as soon as they hear the command. They should begin to work on the task right away, or at least they should prepare to do so. They should move in that general direction.
 2. Children often don't want to obey. They use various methods to postpone obedience; they use delay tactics in an effort to avoid obeying commands or doing things they'd rather not do.
 3. Parents should teach their children that anything other than first-time obedience is disobedience; a "slow obey is no obey." Parents should not need to state commands over and over again. Parents should not need to explain or try to convince the child. Parents should never beg a child to obey.

Parents should state the command and then enforce it. Don't allow the child to dely.
 4. You may allow a child to appeal or protest a command, but only if he displays a submissive, respectful attitude. It's generally best to explain your reasons for a particular instruction after the child has obeyed it. You don't argue with a child; you demand that he/she obeys first.
 5. Is a parent obligated to explain to the children why the task is necessary? No, a child does not need to understand why a parent wants a job done. That's especially true for young children. In fact, if the child constantly asks why, it's probably a delaying tactic and it's a form of disobedience.
 6. What are you teaching your children if you allow them regularly to ignore your commands? What are you teaching if you allow the child habitually to delay obedience? You are teaching that the child is in charge; that the child has the right to ignore his parents.

¹ This list from Scott Estell, *The Christian Home*, chapter 5: The Role of the Child.

7. Unfortunately, many parents train their children to delay obedience by repeating commands over and over again. They demand obedience only after they've given the command multiple times. The more often you allow delayed obedience, the more you are reinforcing the idea that delayed obedience is OK. You are reinforcing the idea that the child is in charge. You are training the child not to listen.
8. Often parents increase their stress level as the child continues to delay obedience. They speak louder, use the child's full name, threaten some punishment, even bribe the child in an effort to convince him to obey. You should not have to convince your child to obey. Tell your child what you want, and insist that he/she obeys quickly.
9. If the child cannot obey right away, at least the child should respond in some way. "Just a minute," "OK, I'll be right there." The child should give you some indication that he/she has heard the command and plans to obey it ASAP.
10. If the child refuses to obey right away, then the parents impose consequences right away. The child should know that if he/she does not obey quickly, punishment will follow quickly. It doesn't have to be a drastic, dramatic form of punishment, but it should be something that gets your child's attention.

Quote: "The most subtle form of passive rebellion is to wait to obey until just before getting into trouble. A child considers that it is a victory of his own will over the will of his parents when he does not obey until he himself decides to do so" (Fugate).

We need to teach our children that we expect them to obey *when we decide to do so*, not when they decide to do so. Parents must maintain their authority over their children. When you tolerate delayed obedience, you are telling the child that he/she is the authority. Don't allow your child to manipulate you.

B. Teach children to obey completely.

Slow to obey is to disobey, and partial obedience is disobedience.

1. Parents need to be clear and thorough in their instructions so that there is no misunderstanding on their child's part. With smaller children, this often requires getting down on their level, looking them in the eye, and making them repeat your instructions back to you.
2. It's common that children begin a task and fail to finish it. The child begins but quickly gets distracted and fails to complete the job. [We have one of those.] Young children especially have a hard time staying on task. A child like that needs to learn how to do a task fully, without becoming distracted. And parents help the child through that process by insisting that the child do the job fully/completely.
3. Is it reasonable to expect a 3-year-old to complete a task without becoming distracted? Probably not. But as the child grows, he/she needs to understand that parents expect the job to be completed fully.
4. Why would a child be reluctant to complete a task?
 - a) In some cases, children are simply not mature enough to see a complicated job through to its conclusion. E.g., the three-year-old—they are just immature. It's not rebellion or intentional disobedience. They are not capable.
 - b) But in other cases, failure to complete a job is a subtle form of rebellion. Children assert their own wills over their parents by partially following instructions, by beginning a task but not finishing it. Parents are wise to nip this form of rebellion in the bud.
5. The child needs to understand that the parents expect him/her to finish the job.

Illus.: Patch the Pirate song "Finish the Job"—Finish the job, finish the job, get it done; finish the job, finish the job, then have fun. When you have a job to do, never quit until you're through. Finish the job, finish the job, get it done.

Teach your kids that you expect them to obey quickly and completely. If they have legitimate questions, that's OK. And there may be a good reason why a child can't start a job or finish it right away. But parents must not allow delaying tactics to work. If children refuse to obey quickly and completely for no good reason, quick punishment should follow.

- C. Teach children to obey submissively (with a good attitude).
1. Children must not only obey, but also have submissive attitudes while doing so.
 2. Our goal as parents is not merely to change our child's behavior, but to change his heart. We want to instill good character in our kids, the kind of character that obeys because it's the right thing to do. If the child is rebellious, he must learn that it does not pay to rebel against parental authority.
 3. Part of a submissive spirit is doing a job without complaining or talking back. Once you have assigned a job, don't allow the child to whine or gripe about it. Insist that the child do the job with a good attitude and without complaint.

The heart of the child is just as sinful as the heart of the adult. One of the difficult tasks of parenthood is trying to mold your children's hearts so they have a good attitude about obeying commands. Or at least they are not rebellious; they can do a task without complaint or resentment even if they'd rather not do it.

4. Parents should impose significant consequences if the child refuses to do a job. Make the child do the job even if he is unwilling or has a bad attitude. You are not helping your child if you allow him/her to avoid jobs he/she does not like. Life is full of doing tasks we'd rather not do, and it's best if children learn early to do things they'd rather not do with a good attitude. Don't reward rebellion or a bad attitude by allowing the child to avoid the job. Make the child do the job no matter what.

Quote: "At whatever point a child chooses to rebel, his parents must utilize sufficient force to put down the revolt immediately. ... Parents can neither avoid the problem of a child's rebellion nor attempt to negotiate with it. Rebellion must be conquered" (Fugate).

It should go without saying that children need not submit to sinful or unreasonable commands. Ephesians commands children to “obey your parents *in the Lord*.” If the parents command something that is contradictory to what the Lord would want, then children are not obligated to obey. In a Christian home, that should never happen.

- D. Training your children to obey is crucial to both their physical and spiritual well-being. If children don’t learn to obey their parents, it’s unlikely that they’ll ever learn to obey higher authorities like employers, government representatives, and ultimately, God. It’s not in your child’s best interests to become a rebel against legitimate authority.
- E. Complete obedience is the ideal, but we should not be surprised if children do not reach the ideal sometimes. We don’t want to have unreasonable expectations for our children. Our children are still sinners at heart, just like we are. And children need to learn to control themselves, which often takes time. So we have to extend grace and patience with our kids, especially when they are young.
- F. Obedience is not natural to children; parents must teach these skills and characteristics to their children.
- G. So don’t be surprised if your child delays obedience, seeks to obey in his own way, or obeys partially, and does not obey willingly. Part of the parenting process is helping our kids develop good character, and that takes time.

Trans: Our children should know that we expect them to obey. God expects them to obey. If we give them a job, they should know that they have to do it, and it will go better for them if they do it quickly and completely and with a good attitude. But even if they have a bad attitude and try to get out of the job, kids should know that their parents will insist that they do the job and finish it according to the parents’ expectations.

One last thing: there’s a difference between disobedience and failure. If a child tries to do a job and fails, that’s not disobedience. We should expect our kids to fail occasionally. I think failure is a good teacher. Kids can learn much through the “school of hard knocks.” It’s unwise for parents to shelter their children from the difficult tasks of life. Let your children see how difficult some jobs are; maybe they’ll have a greater appreciation for a job after they see how hard it is and fail at it a couple of times. Let your kids fail; it’s good for them. And you don’t punish a child when he fails.

II. Children must honor their parents.

Ephesians 6:1–3 *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.* ² *“Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise:* ³ *“that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”*

- A. The Bible contains several commands directing children to honor their parents (Ex 20:12; Eph 6:2). Jesus repeated the command in the Gospels (Mk 7:9-13).
- B. Honor is somewhat different from obedience. To honor someone is to show respect and esteem. You can obey without honoring someone, but you can't honor without obeying him/her.
- C. Honor prohibits rebellion or disrespect. Children who honor their parents are not defiant or belligerent.
- D. The OT contains severe punishments for those who would disrespect their parents. Striking or cursing one's parents was a capital crime, punishable by death (cf. Ex 21:1, 17).

Proverbs 30:17 *The eye that mocks his father, And scorns obedience to his mother, The ravens of the valley will pick it out, And the young eagles will eat it.*

- E. Why would a child dishonor his parents?
 - 1. Paul mentions one reason in Eph 6:4—“provoke not your children to wrath.” Children naturally will dishonor and disrespect their parents if the parents treat their children badly.

How do parents provoke their children to wrath?

The word “provoke” means “to rouse to anger, exasperate, to enrage.” How would parents ever do that? There are several possibilities that various writers have suggested:

By unjust demands, unreasonable severity, and unremitting criticism (Kent, p. 109). By fault-finding, being neglectful and inconsistent (Hughes, p. 200). Through over-protection, showing favoritism (see the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37:3-4), discouragement, neglect, unfair comparison, and physical or verbal abuse (Hendriksen, pp. 261-262). By excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, and subjecting a child to humiliation (Lincoln, p. 406). Wood suggests Paul is warning against goading their children into a state of perpetual resentment.²

Is it possible that your child is disobedient because you are provoking the child, goading him/her to the point of resentment?

2. Another reason children might not honor their parents is if parents themselves are dishonorable. If the parents are living dishonorably, they should expect the same from their kids. So parents must demonstrate the kind of behavior they want to see in their kids. Don't be a "do as I say but not as I do" kind of parent. Be an honorable person, and expect your kids to treat you with respect.
3. Parents should teach their children to speak respectfully. The father in particular must not allow his children to speak disrespectfully to their mother. Children need to see that it will be personally costly to them to disrespect their parents.
4. I would see disrespect as a more serious issue than other forms of disobedience. I would respond to disrespect quite sternly. Parents must not tolerate disrespect from their children, even from the youngest of them. Don't allow children to speak disrespectfully or act disrespectfully toward you.

Quote: Some forms of disrespect are quite subtle – tone of voice, facial expression, the rolling of the eyes, stomping the foot, slamming the door, etc. Parents must always respond to disrespect from their children with firm discipline from a very early age.³

² Scott Estell, *Christian Home*, n.d.

³ Scott Estell, *Christian Home*, n.d.

Reinforce to your children that the parents are the authority in the home and that disrespect for that authority will not be tolerated. Parents must insist that their children act respectfully toward them.

III. Children must learn. Prov 1:1-6

- A. Over and over again, especially in Proverbs, the biblical writer exhorts young people to pursue wisdom and instruction. Solomon wants young people to hear, to receive, to increase in learning and attain wise counsels. Young people should pursue knowledge and wisdom.
- B. Parents are responsible to teach their children, and children, once they are of a suitable age, should recognize the obligation they have to learn. The child should want to learn; he/she should see the value of learning.
- C. Parents should instill within their children that wisdom and knowledge are good things. Education is one of the keys to success in nearly every area of life. It's worth taking the time and effort to seek wisdom, knowledge, and instruction. Even though education is a difficult task, it's worth doing. The benefits outweigh the costs.
- D. Kids often think that they need to learn only what is necessary for a job. Sometimes parents reinforce that idea. But I would suggest that kids need to learn what is necessary to be a fully-functioning Christian adult. The child needs to understand the world and the things going on in the world. He needs to understand who God is and what his obligations are in God's world.

Think in terms of vocations—family, church, citizen, employee. Parents should want their child to enjoy a well-rounded education that helps the child fulfill all the roles of adulthood.
- E. How can parents instill a love for learning within their children? How do we convince our children that learning is good and for their benefit?
 - 1. Lay a spiritual foundation for learning
 - a) The Bible tells us that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...” (Prov 1:7a). We begin our pursuit of knowledge with God and what he has revealed. A relationship with God forms the basis of education.

- b) Unfortunately, much of what passes for education today begins with the exact opposite foundational principle—there is no God, or that God has no bearing on education. Much education today is secular—it has no interest in God or in morality. Human thinking and ideas are the highest forms of authority in our culture, so children are going to learn about the ideas humans come up with. There is no room in secular education for God. God has been removed from the government schools.
- c) What is the most important part of a child’s education? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom, so what they need to learn are the basic biblical truths. E.g., ...
 - (1) The child is a unique creation of God; his/her life has meaning and significance because he/she bears the image of God. We know our meaning and purpose in life—to glorify God.
 - (2) The child is a sinner in need of a savior.
 - (3) Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Salvation is by grace alone, by faith alone, and through Christ alone.
 - (4) The Bible is the word of God and it contains the wisdom of God. Parents should teach children to honor and value the Bible.
 - (5) Christians must be committed to the moral value system we find in the Bible.
- d) Parents are responsible to teach their children the truth and to protect them from error and from evil. Christian parents should want to instill a Christian worldview within their children. They should want consistency in their education. That is, what the kids learn at school should not contradict what they learn at home or at church.
- e) We should approach education from a biblical, Christian foundation. Education begins with respect for God and for God’s commands and teachings. Christian education begins on a biblical foundation.

2. Do your best to educate your children.

a) Some people advocate home school, others promote private schools. I attended public school, and I am well aware of all the problematic things now being promoted at public school. Each family has to make its own choice, but I would earnestly encourage parents to put your children into the best possible environment for them to learn the truth and avoid error and evil.

b) Home school is a good choice for some but probably not a good choice for others. Same could be said for private school. Given what is going on in public schools today, I would agree with many other pastors in recommending that parents not send their children to public school if they can avoid it. Sometimes that's the only option, but if I were making a recommendation, I would urge parents to avoid public school if possible.

If the child is at public school, the parents might have to do some de-programming or de-indoctrination. Public schools are notorious for promoting anti-Christian values. From what I can see, it's far worse now than when I was in public school—and it was pretty bad then.

c) Whatever the environment of the education, parents must do their best to make sure that their kids are getting a good education. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with the parents; they must insure that their kids learn. And children should understand that their parents expect them to do well in school.

d) If children are not doing well in school, parents should be very fervent in making necessary changes to help the child do better in school. Perhaps some privileges need to be taken away until the child improves his grades.

3. Provide an example for your children to follow.

a) If learning is important to parents, it will more likely be important to children. If education is a high priority for the parents, the children will assume that it ought to be a high priority for them as well.

- b) We all know that higher education, beyond high school, is *not* absolutely necessary. Many people do very well in life with a high school education. Many do very well even if they didn't complete high school. College is not necessary for many people. Many people go to college and get degrees that do them no good. Some people are simply not cut out for college, but that doesn't mean that they are not able to learn.
- c) Of course, for others, college is just about necessary for their goals in life. College can be a great experience, and I recommend it for those who need it.
- d) Having a love for learning has little to do with degrees or years of school one has attended. Anyone can have a good attitude toward learning and instruction. When the parents have that kind of attitude, the kids naturally pick it up for themselves in most cases.
- e) Parents can help their children by valuing education and expecting their children to do well in school.

The roles of children are fairly simple: obey, honor, and learn. Those obligations are in place for a child until he/she leaves home to form his/her own family. Even after a child leaves home as an adult, he/she should still be respectful of his/her parents.

These are fairly simple roles, yet we know that children often have a hard time fulfilling them. We should not expect children to fulfill these roles automatically or naturally or perfectly. Parents need to help their children obey, honor, and learn. In fact, they should demand that their children obey, honor, and learn. If children fail to fulfill these basic obligations, it may be that the parents failed to teach them.

So these are the children's roles, but the parents play a big role in helping children fulfill them. To a large degree, if the children obey, honor, and learn, it's because the parents have taught their children to do so.