

Revealing Relationships

by Eric Pasanchin

Parents

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)

Reflection

As the nation of Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments they may have expected profound words that transcended all human wisdom and common sense. But in many cases, God tells them (and us) what we already know to be true. If you want to live long and prosper in the land, there are some things you've got to do for your society to work. Key among these is the importance of children honoring and respecting their parents. But what does it mean for children to honor parents? Does it mean unquestioning obedience or agreement? Does the meaning of this commandment change as the child reaches adulthood? What about children who are abused or molested? Surely, there isn't a one-size fits all interpretation of this command! In the theological tradition of the Presbyterian Church, its meaning is often expanded to include obedience to all those in positions of governing authority. Is that part of this commandment too?

I suppose you can get into endless discussions about the interpretation of any Bible passage. But I think this is one we'd do well to take more at face value without over-thinking it. The point is, if we are to have a healthy society, children, as a rule, need to respect the authority of their parents. Most parents are not abusive, but genuinely concerned with their children's welfare. Most parents try to instill positive values in their children and teach them discipline so that they safely grow into functional adults. Most parents make great sacrifices to provide for and protect their children. These are all things that merit respect and cooperation. The commandment isn't talking about any other relationship, and it doesn't address the very different circumstances of abuse or molestation. It is simply saying that ordinary parents deserve to be honored by their children, and that when they are not, it does not bode well for our relationships in society.

As a former teenager, and now the parent of a teenager, I am well aware of the many times that children don't act respectfully toward their parents. Unlike the Israelites of old, I don't see this as a crime punishable by death. I hope you don't either. If every moment of disrespect were punished according to ancient Biblical standards, there'd be nobody left. We have nearly all had moments when our parents made us so frustrated that we wanted to scream. Most of us have gotten mad at our parents, and said things about them that were not fair, or that were hurtful. But at the same time, most of us regret these moments. In many cases, we apologize. I've found this to be especially true as I have aged and gone through many of the parenting experiences my parents went through with me. My understanding and forgiveness have grown a great deal as I've seen how hard parenting can be. That doesn't mean I agree with every call they made, but it does mean I have a new sense of compassion for them and the difficult tasks they handled as best they knew how.

To honor our parents isn't to view them as perfect or infallible. In fact, that would be to dishonor them. The proper honor of parents is to recognize that they are fallible people doing an extraordinarily difficult job and, usually, doing the best they can at great personal cost. Through all the arguments and disagreements of life, we'd do well to respect their efforts, and to show some appreciation for what they've been through on our behalf. That doesn't mean they won't sometimes drive you crazy. Don't worry, you drive them crazy too!

Activity

If your parents are alive, you might want to thank them for all they have done to care for you and protect you. You might also want to apologize for those times you have given them a hard time. Whether your parents are alive or not, you can take time in prayer, thanking God for all in them that was good and kind and caring, and asking for forgiveness for those times when you did not honor them appropriately.

Prayer

God of all generations, I thank you for the privilege of being born into this world. For all those times my parents showed care for me, I thank you. For those times when they failed to reflect your love, I ask for your grace and healing. For those times I caused them pain, I ask your forgiveness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

God calls us to honor our parents by appreciating their efforts and showing them grace when they fail.

Children

Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand. He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel. Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow." (Judges 11:29-35)

Reflection

You may not be familiar with this story. To summarize: Jephthah was a foolish man who made his child pay for his mistakes. While in the midst of a military campaign, he promised God that, if God would grant him victory, he would offer as a sacrifice whoever came out to greet him when he returned home. Considering that his daughter was the one waiting for him to return, you'd think it would have occurred to him what he was promising to do. But he seems to have been too impetuous to realize how big a disaster this would be. When he won the battle and returned home, his daughter was naturally thrilled to see him alive. She ran out to greet him in typical middle-eastern celebratory fashion. It's only then that Jephthah realized what he had done. But rather than say, "I've made a big mistake!" He blamed his daughter for bringing him distress. Worse yet, he seemed to not even consider that his vow was evil and that it might be a more godly thing to set it aside and apologize to God for his stupidity. No, he followed through. He gave his daughter a year to mourn, and then he killed her.

As unthinkable as Jephthah's behavior might seem, there is a sense in which it reflects a common mistake in parenting. We certainly don't vow to kill our offspring, but we may at times try to sacrifice them – their personalities, their desires, their unique individuality – to our own desires. It's not uncommon for us to have dreams for our children. Sometimes those dreams are for our kids to discover their unique personality and interests and to become all that God made them to be. Other times, our dreams are more selfish. We might want them to become replicas of ourselves – sharing the same interests and goals, maybe following in the same career path, and perhaps even achieving those things that we wanted to but couldn't. While it can be flattering to see your child emulate you, it is no tribute when they feel like they don't have a choice about it. The fact is, God makes each one of us to be

unique. We each have our own special interests and personalities. To become what God created us to be, we must be allowed to explore our individuality and learn to make our own choices. Obviously, the degree of freedom one allows a five year old will be much different from what one allows a fifteen year old.

It isn't that parents don't mean well when they try to steer their children in certain directions. Nevertheless, their guidance may or may not be helpful. I spent three years of my college career studying to become an accountant. My parents were not at all pleased when I wanted to change my major to religion. In fact, they urged me to continue my training in accounting. They were justifiably concerned that I be able to have a career. After all, what can you do with a B.A. in religion? But as well-meaning as they were, they missed something important: I wasn't cut out to be an accountant. It just wasn't what I was meant to be. Thankfully, they relented and I was able to follow my own path. But it can be very hard for parents to let their children make their own choices, particularly when those choices don't fit the parents' views.

The challenge for moms and dads is to provide sufficient structure and discipline for their children, while allowing them the freedom to discover who God made them to be. Without a doubt, they will make mistakes and suffer pain as a consequence. Such is the price of learning and growth. As parents, we need to accept that our children are ultimately not our possessions, but rather a trust from God. When we help them grow into the unique individuals God made them to be, we will have done our job well.

Activity

Have a talk with your children, whether they are still at home or out on their own. Ask them how they feel about the guidance you offer. How free have they felt to find their own way in life? Are there things you can do to empower them in discovering God's unique purpose for their lives? Are there things you can celebrate together?

Prayer

Life-giving God, I thank you for the opportunities you give me to nurture others. Help me to honor the unique gifts of your creation in each person. May I never sacrifice another to my own desires, but rather encourage and empower each of your children to find your way for their lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

God calls us to help our children discover and fulfill their unique, God-given identity.

Brothers and Sisters

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die." Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the Lord before I die.' Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." (Genesis 27:1-10)

Reflection

When you have brothers or sisters, there is no telling how your relationships will unfold. Sometimes there is a sense of strong connection and friendship. Other times there is rivalry and alienation. A whole range of different feelings can be part of the relationship between siblings. In the case of the brothers Esau and Jacob, their experience included competition, deception, betrayal, rage, fear and reconciliation. Today's reading gives us just a glimpse of the overall picture. Esau, as the oldest son, was entitled to the ceremonial blessing of the father which conferred upon him certain rights as the next leader of the family. But Esau and Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebekah, didn't see eye to eye on things. Esau was not only the first born son who was traditionally entitled to certain privileges, he was also Isaac's favorite. Jacob, on the other hand, was favored by his mother. While most parents recognize the wisdom of treating their children equally, these two did not. Instead, they played them off against each other. Rebekah devised a scheme whereby Jacob tricked Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau. The story of their rivalry continues for many chapters of the book of Genesis, with Jacob fleeing in fear for his life, and eventually returning to reconcile with Esau. It was a long, difficult journey for both of them.

It's hard not to feel at least a little competitive with one's siblings. Even in families where the parents strive to treat each child equally, some rivalry is almost inevitable. In other families, like Jacob and Esau's, the conflict can become much more intense. One woman I knew had several children among whom she continually encouraged conflict. Even after the children had grown up, she played them off against each other, complaining to each one about the others...and they let her get away with it! Each one felt honored to be chosen as their mother's confidant, never realizing that she was putting them down when talking to their

siblings. As you might imagine, the relationships between these brothers and sisters were perpetually strained. Even as grown-ups, their quarrels and resentments were kept fresh and alive by all the negative talk that was going on. Sadly, it wasn't until their mother died that they began to connect with each other as adults.

For those with brothers or sisters, it's important to realize that what unites you is usually much greater than that which divides you. That is, you have in common a wealth of experiences that you cannot share with anyone else. In spite of the arguments you may have had, or the hurt feelings that have been caused, you have a significant spiritual bond. This bond might not seem as important when you are young. Siblings may be much more aware of their differences and resentments as children or young adults, but as they age and begin to experience the deaths of friends and loved ones, the conflicts become less important. Instead, you begin to realize that very few people understand you like your brothers and sisters. No one else knows what it was like to grow up in your family of origin, shares the same memories, or feels the same emotional impact when your parents get sick or die. There is something very special about being able to share these experiences.

Jacob and Esau eventually reconciled, in spite of all the hard feelings that had passed between them. As they aged, they saw that it didn't make sense to be at odds with each other. This isn't to say that they became best friends, but they did reconnect and find peace in their relationship. For those of us who have conflicted relationships with our brothers and sisters, the story of Jacob and Esau can be a roadmap to reconciliation. Past hurts don't have to dominate our present or future. New beginnings are possible. Those of us who already enjoy close relationships with our siblings can rejoice at having someone who knows and understands us so well. The experiences shared by brothers and sisters can forge a spiritual bond that is a great gift; a gift that can sustain you through the inevitable changes and losses of life.

Activity

Take a look at some pictures of your family from when you were growing up. If you have brothers and sisters, note especially the photos of you together. If you are an only child, perhaps you have pictures of yourself with cousins or other relations of the same generation. Think back to the time the photos were taken. What were your feelings toward these people? How have they changed? Do you feel a need to say anything to these relations? Are there words of gratitude or reconciliation you'd like to share? As long as you live, it is never too late to reinforce this important familial connection!

Prayer

God of Esau and Jacob, I thank you for the gift of life, and for all those who nurtured me in my formative years. Even difficult relationships have shaped me, and I pray for the ability to find your grace in those painful memories. Give me the ability to show appreciation for my siblings. Help us to forgive one another for the pain we have caused, and to restore relationships that have been strained. Enable us to strengthen our connection so that we may be to each other a source of strength and understanding throughout the years. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

The experiences shared by brothers and sisters forge a spiritual bond that can be a great gift.

Spouses

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:21-33)

Reflection

Today we come to one of the most sacred relationships of all: marriage. So sacred is the bond of marriage, that the Apostle Paul likens it to the relationship between Christ and the church. Unfortunately, by taking this metaphor too literally, or by taking verses out of context, people have used this verse to perpetuate the subservience of women. But that is not what this passage is about.

The first line of our reading tells both husbands and wives to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”. Both marriage partners are called to take seriously the needs and well-being of the other, and to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to care for one another. As Paul elaborates on this theme, he builds on the cultural assumptions of his day about the roles of men and women, and he uses the metaphor of Christ and the church to transform those assumptions. In Jewish culture, it was assumed that men were the head of the household and that women were to be subservient. Paul challenges this with the call to mutual submission. He also places the relationship in an entirely different context. No longer could cultural traditions determine husband-wife relations, but rather the example of Christ. If a man was viewed as the head of the household, Paul said it could not be as a dictatorial presence, but rather as a self-sacrificing lover who would do anything to care for and protect his beloved. If women were to submit to their husbands, it must be out of love and respect, and not a matter of fear and coercion. You’ll notice that Paul says a lot more about the need for husbands to sacrifice, care for, and be subject to their wives than he does about women being subject to their husbands. He is trying to counteract prevailing cultural trends. More than that, he is offering us the opportunity to better understand our relationship with God through our marriage relationships.

One thing I've learned from being married is how much love, commitment and personal sacrifice are required. To be a truly loving spouse, one must listen to and respect the feelings of one's beloved. Too often, husbands and wives disregard each other's feelings, and write them off as wrong or irrational. But to do so is a great failure to love. When we are more interested in justifying ourselves and our behavior than we are in meeting the needs of our spouse, we undermine our relationship and detract from our sense of loving connection. Imagine how you would feel if your spouse typically disregarded your feelings and told you that you were wrong. This would not draw you closer together. Think how you would feel if your spouse resented you and frequently spoke negatively about you to others. Would this make you feel more loving? Hardly! In marriage, as in the relationship between Christ and the Church, both spouses must make each other the priority. For a husband, his wife must come first. For a wife, her husband must come first. Obviously, when children are involved, they become the priority. But even then, husbands and wives must devote themselves to listening to, loving and respecting each other – even when they don't see things the same way. Marriage isn't a contest or a competition. It's a partnership that can succeed only if it is grounded in mutual care and compassion; if is modeled on the love, devotion and sacrifice found in the relationship between Jesus and his Church.

Activity

If you are married, take some time to think about your marriage. How often do you sacrifice what you want for the sake of your partner? How often does he or she sacrifice for you? (You might want to ask, because it is probably much more often than you know.) Count the times you have not listened to or taken seriously your partner's desires. Is it possible that you can revisit those issues in a new way as a demonstration of your love?

Prayer

God of loving sacrifice, I thank you for the opportunity to learn of your love through my relationships. Help me to listen carefully to the needs of my loved ones, and to respond with compassion and humility. Give me the strength to make sacrifices for my loved ones and to find in those sacrifices a deeper understanding of your love for me. In Jesus' name. Amen,

Key Thought

Our marriage partnerships work best when grounded in mutual care, compassion, and sacrifice.

Friends

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:12-17)

Reflection

Just as our family relationships are important to our spirituality, our friendships also provide us the opportunity to grow in love and grace. One of the special things about friendships is that they are developed with a greater degree of freedom than other relationships. You don’t choose your parents or children. And while you choose your spouse, once that choice is made, you are committed to her or him. But friends tend to come and go. Especially as you grow, change, or move, you will find your circle of acquaintances changing, and your connection with different friends evolving. Even so, friendships are also an opportunity to experience God’s grace.

At various points in my life I have been surrounded by different sets of friends. There were the friends who made high school bearable. There were the friends who cared for me when I moved far away from my family, and who became like a second family to me. There were other friends who supported me when my first marriage ended, and still others who supported me when I was the pastor of a divided, conflicted church. I’m not still in touch with all of these people. Time and distance have taken their toll. But I am still extremely grateful for all their acts of kindness and love. I would not be the person I am today if weren’t for the unselfish love of friends who rallied around me during times of struggle. They became for me tangible signs of God’s love and care.

Jesus tells us what to do if we want to be his friends: love one another. In so doing, we act not only as friends of Jesus, but as friends to one another. Friends love each other, make sacrifices for each other, and share their lives. Each one of us needs people to confide in and connect with. But as the old saying goes, to have a friend, you have to be a friend. If we want to experience the love of God through friendship, our first task must be to show love to others, and be a friend to them. This may not issue in a multitude of close personal friends, but it will lead to stronger connections with others and, perhaps, one or two life-long friendships. Friendships are important expressions of our connection with the rest of the human family, and yet one more way to experience God at work in our lives.

Activity

Think about the people you interact with on a regular basis. How can you be a better friend to them? Are there ways you can show care and concern for them? Are there things you can do help them feel loved and valued? Don't wait for someone else to reach out to you. Instead, be the initiator. Whether a deep friendship results or not, you will create good will and grow in the likeness of Christ, who loves us unconditionally.

Prayer

God of love and grace, help me to be a friend to others. Let me reflect your love by performing acts of kindness and being attuned to the pain and needs of the people I know. May your mercy touch their hearts through me, and may I also experience your compassion through them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

Friends can be tangible signs of God's love and care.

Strangers, Enemies, and Everyone Else

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)

Reflection

The hardest relationships of all are those we have with people that we don't know, and in some cases don't want to know. They may be strangers. They may be enemies. They may be people on the other side of the world that we will never meet. Nevertheless, we are in relationship with them by virtue of our shared humanity and origin in the creative power of God. What I mean is, all human beings are connected, whether we realize it or not. A previous generation of Biblical scholars used to summarize the message of Jesus as being about "The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man." Obviously, they created this summary before concerns about gender inclusive language were widely shared! But the metaphor of God as parent to all humanity, and all humans as brothers and sisters to one another, is a Biblical teaching. You and I are deeply connected to strangers we pass on the highway, panhandlers at intersections, members of opposing political parties, enemies in warfare, and even the Dalai Lama! This connection is rooted in our emerging from the same creator and being loved by the same God. Our destinies are intertwined and interdependent. But this connection can be hard to see, and our differences can seem insurmountable. This is why Jesus offers us the story of the Good Samaritan.

In the parable, a Jewish man is waylaid by thugs and left seriously wounded by the side of the road. He is virtually ignored by two highly respected religious leaders from among his own people. One traveler does stop to help him, however. This man is a Samaritan, a member of a group considered mortal enemies of the Jews. And yet, in spite of the animosity and mistrust between their peoples, the Samaritan helps the Jew. He bandages him and pays for his care at an inn. How could he do this? Because he recognized their common humanity. When the Bible tells us to "love your neighbor as yourself," it is talking about this kind of thing. Our neighbors aren't just the family across the street. Our neighbors are anyone and everyone in this global community.

One of the surest signs of spiritual growth is when we become able to show love to both strangers and enemies. This extension of love beyond ordinary human boundaries is the closest we can ever come to reflecting the nature of God, who loves all equally and without distinction. Loving strangers and enemies isn't easy. It requires us to overcome resistance from our peers, as well as from those for whom we are seeking to care. It requires the ability to listen and learn, and to see the world from a different perspective. While this doesn't mean we will come to agree with our enemies or adopt a different worldview, it does mean that we will grow in our understanding and compassion. When we learn to love without distinction, we grow in spirit, and draw ever nearer to the heart of God.

Activity

Take a look through today's newspaper and make note of people in the world who are suffering – especially those who are different from you or who you might consider enemies. Are there ways you can do something to show care for them? In some cases, you might be able to get personally involved in a situation, especially if it is local. In other cases, your involvement may have to be less personal. Perhaps you can donate to help someone in another part of the world, or write letters on behalf of someone who is being persecuted. You can certainly pray for others. Whatever you do, try to recognize your connection with other people, no matter how different they may be. We are all part of the same human family, and all children of one God.

Prayer

Lord, I struggle with your call to love other people. It is hard enough when they are people I know and like, but when they are strangers or enemies, I can barely conceive of showing them love. Soften my heart to appreciate our common humanity. Give me the grace to see myself from the perspective of others, and to become more humble and loving in the process. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Key Thought

When we learn to love all people without distinction, we draw near to the heart of God.

Small Group Meeting: Revealing Relationships

1. Path of Community

Go around your group and let everyone share their answer to this question.

- With whom do you have your longest-lasting relationship?
- What has enabled your relationship to last so long?

2. Path of Learning

Today we will review the importance of relationships for our spirituality. Discuss these questions in your group.

- Which of this week's readings/scriptures meant the most to you?
- How have your relationships served as signs of God's love?
- How have your relationships served as was a way for God to speak to you?
- How have your relationships helped you to grow?
- Are there any relationships that you view in a new light after this week's readings?

3. Path of Service

Plan for your group to take part in a form of service to others – whether separately or as individuals – by the end of the fifth week of our study. Take time each week to work on your plans. During the final week, evaluate your project, celebrate what went well, and learn from those things that could have been better.

4. Path of Invitation

Brainstorm some people you can invite to be part of your group. Commit to inviting them the next time you get together. When it comes to the latter part of your study, you might want to plan a social event to which you could invite newcomers. This would be especially helpful if you elect to continue meeting as a small group after Lent.

5. Path of Worship

Share any highs or lows from the week. After each person shares, the group may say together, "We share your prayer." Other options include participants taking turns in leading prayer, or having a time for silent prayer after all have shared.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. (You may wish to join hands for this!)

6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.