

## How to Honor Your Parents

*by Diane Stelling*

How to honor one's parents is a fundamental issue for survivors of childhood abuse. The commandment to honor your father and your mother can prove to be a stumbling block for many victims, leaving them feeling confused, trapped, and inadequate as Christians.

The frustration arises from reading Scripture verses pertaining to parent/child relationships that focus on the Law and the dire consequences that will befall children for not revering their parents. In most specific verses throughout the Bible, parents are presented as positive role models, and children are expected to respect their parents and pay heed to their counsel and wisdom. This makes sense in a majority of situations, but creates great anxiety and feelings of guilt for children of abusive parents, because abusive parents are not positive role models.

Victims are confused about what it means to honor and obey one's parents when their parents behave in a consistently evil, ungodly manner. They feel trapped because they feel they must obey their parents, respect and honor them, although morally they know their parents are wrong. For victims, their true feelings about their parents make them feel ashamed, and their inner chaos is caused by the inability to reconcile their moral values with their parents' actions. The type of Scripture verses described above reinforce guilt in victims and drive them further away from seeking help from their church for fear of rejection by their congregation and by God because they cannot live up to what others expect of them as Christians.

There is much confusion regarding honoring and obeying. They are not the same thing. The distinction between the two, and the answer to the question about how one is to honor one's parents, can be found in a Bible story that is not well known by many people. It is the account of Jonathan and his best friend, David, as told in 1 Samuel 19-20:

Saul was Jonathan's father, as well as the first king of Israel. But because Saul did not obey God, God rejected him and wanted David to become the next king of Israel. Saul, at a banquet, jealous and scared of David's popularity, commanded his son Jonathan to bring David to him to be killed. David, however, was Jonathan's best friend and Jonathan knew that David had done nothing wrong. Jonathan told this to his father and then defied his father publicly at the festival by refusing to go get David. Saul became so enraged that he threw a spear with intent to kill his own son, but missed. Jonathan knew that David was innocent and that God was with David, not Saul, so he went to David and helped him to escape, thus saving David's life.

This story explains it all so clearly. It is the only instance I can find in the Bible of a child openly disobeying his sinful parent with positive consequences. Jonathan knew what God wanted him to do, and he trusted in the Lord and followed him. How difficult it must have

been for him to defy his father, who was also the king, and to do it publicly. Although Jonathan disobeyed his father, ultimately he honored his father by living a life that was pleasing to God.

It becomes obvious that honoring one's parents means living a life following God regardless of how one's parents live. The reality is, the only time the words "honor" and "obey" are completely interchangeable is when we are referring to God. Since God is perfect, honoring and obeying God are one and the same.

When we place our faith in man, even our parents, we set ourselves up for disappointment, since as humans we are by nature fallible. If one's parents follow God, honoring and obeying them are almost one and the same. However, if one's parents do not represent a godly moral code, then it is not only acceptable, but necessary, to depart from their practices and follow God. It is by living a godly life that one brings honor to one's family and name.

There are vast numbers of abuse victims in society, many of whom are unable to speak about their abuse, and many of whom are children. God does not want people to remain in abusive situations. Children need to understand that it is all right for them to speak up and tell someone if they are experiencing abuse; that it is acceptable in that instance to disobey their parents; that they honor God by revealing the abuse: *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible."* (Ephesians 5:11-14)

Adult survivors of childhood abuse who are struggling in relationships with their parents should seek professional counseling. They need to know appropriate boundaries for their relationships with their parents, that they do not have to remain in abusive parent/child relationships, and that they are not dishonoring their parents if they choose to live a life free from abuse. God is the ultimate parental role model and God is the one we should all obey and honor.