Honor Thy (Very Flawed) Father and Mother

July 30, 2013

Someone asked me about how to resolve the biblical command to "Honor thy father and mother" (Ex. 20:12) with the fact that these people may have had huge and damaging flaws. I suggested googling the phrase "honoring your parents" for some insight. Below are some links I found helpful.

But as I told her, one aspect of honoring flawed parents is to understand that the best (or even only) way you might be able to honor them is from a distance, emotionally and physically. You can give yourself permission to do that.

To give them honor means showing (not necessarily *feeling*) respect, letting them know you are listening and considering what they say. (And it does not necessarily mean following through!) To give them honor means being civil and kind in your dealings with them. It does not mean trusting them. It does not mean placing yourself in harm's way. It means forgiving them, so that you are not carrying and paying for the emotional baggage of their treatment of you. And please remember that forgiveness is given, but trust is earned, so it's entirely possible that you can release the woundings you sustained from them without ever, ever trusting them with your heart, because they don't deserve your trust.

Honoring flawed parents means you have healthy boundaries so that you know where you end and they begin. It means you learn how to protect yourself so that they can't steamroll over you; it also means you have realistic expectations about what they can and cannot give you or do for/to you. (You may need some help adjusting your expectations.) For instance, in our family there is a family member who has never, ever said the words

"thank you." I mean, not even if you pass the salt, or do something they specifically asked! (I think this qualifies as "flawed," don't you?) It is unrealistic to expect that to change. It is an exercise in futility to expect anything different than a lifelong pattern of non-communication. Honoring this person means letting go of the futile hope to ever hear something as simple as "thank you," much less the more profound "I'm proud of you" or even "I love you"! Honoring this person means letting go of unrealistic expectations so we don't set ourselves up for continued disappointment and heartache. (An excellent book is *Boundaries* by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud, and I taught a 7-week study on this book which is available here on Bible.org.)

Finally, let me share with you the insight of Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

> *"To honor our parents means to be thankful for for their existence and to respect their actual role as givers of life in the sequence of human existence. Of course in order to honor them in this way we need to be thankful for our own existence too. But we also will usually need to have pity on them. For, even if they are good people, it is almost always true that they have been quite wrong in many respects, and possibly still are.*
>
> *"Commonly those who have experienced great antagonism with their parents are only able to be thankful for their existence and honor them, as they deeply need to, after the parents have grown old. Then it is possible to pity them, to have mercy on them. And that opens the door to honoring them. With a certain sadness, perhaps, but also with joy and peace at least. One of the greatest gifts of The Kingdom Among Us is the healing of the parent-child relation, 'turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers' (Mal. 4:6)."*

Honor My Mother And Father? How Should I Treat My Abusive Parents?
www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/questions/parentingandfamily/honormymotherandfather.html

What Does It Mean to Honor Your Parents? (in this case, when a parent has dementia)
http://www.newhopenow.com/ask/honor_parents.html

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/honor_thy_very_flawed_father_and_mother

---

"You Are Sending the Wrong Message to People About Dealing with Flawed Parents"

Ms. Bohlin,

Your answer to e-mail "How Do You Honor Deeply Flawed Parents?" sends the wrong messages to readers. Despite dysfunctionality in the family one cannot be superficial to the very people that raised you. You seem to be saying "be nice" but don't really mean it:

> *"To give them honor means showing (not necessarily feeling) respect, letting them know you are listening and considering what they say. (And it does not necessarily mean following through!)"*

In short, you are implying deception in hiding one's true feelings. How can people be compassionate to the world if they are lying to themselves about their true feelings toward their parents? That is truly deceptive.

> *"And please remember that forgiveness is given, but trust is earned, so it's entirely possible that you can release the woundings you sustained from them without ever, ever trusting them with your heart, because they don't deserve your trust."*

This statement is ungodly. This only allows for the heart to be confused and the heart will always be divided. Families will break up and more and more Americans will distance themselves from the family unit. Perhaps you need to carefully read the scriptures again. You are encouraging a false self and pretending to care for people even if one doesn't mean it. A human being must resolve the conflict and openly discuss what the issues are. Communication is essential in discussing problems.

Sorry, your helpful advice will only mislead people. You should suggest spiritual counseling for families. Unresolved issues lead to further breakup of the family unit. Parents are disconnected with their children and grandchildren. Please see that you correct your article with productive help.

Perhaps you haven't observed the horrendous woundings that deeply flawed parents can inflict on their children. Consider my friend Ann, whose father began raping her at age two and then invited his friends to have their way with her as well, all through her childhood. I suggest that being superficial with her father is the only way she can deal with a man who refuses to acknowledge and repent of his unspeakable sins against her.

I would suggest that being civil and cordial instead of erupting into a screaming tirade of anger and pain IS showing honor. Hiding one's true feelings can be a mark of maturity

and wisdom. If you are feeling very grumpy and critical of someone that doesn't deserve it, hiding your feelings behind a choice to be civil is indeed loving and kind.

I don't think either of these cases are about lying to oneself about your feelings. It is choosing a higher road of self-control rather than giving into expressions of fleshly or tortured feelings.

I believe that God has given us great grace in His principle of Romans 12:18: "As far as it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with all men." Some people make it impossible to live at peace with them because of their hard, unrepentant hearts, so one needs to protect oneself with emotional distance. You cannot resolve issues in a family unless everyone is willing. The person who asked the original question was talking about dealing with people unwilling to be humble and transparent enough to resolve the consequences of their flawed nature and behavior.

I hope this helps you understand my position better. I must stand by my statements.

Sue Bohlin

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"How Do You Honor Deeply Flawed Parents?"

I am very interested in reading about how to resolve "Honor thy father and mother" with the fact that these people may have had huge and damaging flaws. Where can I read about that?

You might Google the phrase “honoring your parents” for some insight. Below are some links I hope you find helpful.

But first, let me say that one aspect of honoring flawed parents is to understand that the best (or even only) way you might be able to honor them is from a distance, emotionally and physically. You can give yourself permission to do that.

To give them honor means showing (not necessarily *feeling*) respect, letting them know you are listening and considering what they say. (And it does not necessarily mean following through!) To give them honor means being civil and kind in your dealings with them. It does not mean trusting them. It does not mean placing yourself in harm’s way. It means forgiving them, so that you are not carrying and paying for the emotional baggage of their treatment of you. And please remember that forgiveness is given, but trust is earned, so it’s entirely possible that you can release the woundings you sustained from them without ever, ever trusting them with your heart, because they don’t deserve your trust.

Honoring flawed parents means you have healthy boundaries so that you know where you end and they begin. It means you learn how to protect yourself so that they can’t steamroll over you; it also means you have realistic expectations about what they can and cannot give you or do for/to you. (You may need some help adjusting your expectations.) For instance, in our family there is a family member who has never, ever said the words “thank you.” I mean, not even if you pass the salt, or do something they specifically asked! (I think this qualifies as “flawed,” don’t you?) It is unrealistic to expect that to change. It is an exercise in futility to expect anything different than a lifelong pattern of non-communication. Honoring this person means letting go of the futile hope to ever hear something as simple as “thank you,” much less the more profound “I’m proud of you” or even “I love you”! Honoring this person means letting go of unrealistic expectations so we don’t set ourselves up for continued

disappointment and heartache. (An excellent book is *Boundaries* by Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud.)

Finally, let me share with you the insight of Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*:

> *To honor our parents means to be thankful for for their existence and to respect their actual role as givers of life in the sequence of human existence. Of course in order to honor them in this way we need to be thankful for our own existence too. But we also will usually need to have pity on them. For, even if they are good people, it is almost always true that they have been quite wrong in many respects, and possibly still are.*
>
> *Commonly those who have experienced great antagonism with their parents are only able to be thankful for their existence and honor them, as they deeply need to, after the parents have grown old. Then it is possible to pity them, to have mercy on them. And that opens the door to honoring them. With a certain sadness, perhaps, but also with joy and peace at least. One of the greatest gifts of The Kingdom Among Us is the healing of the parent-child relation, "turning the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6).*

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

Honor My Mother And Father? How Should I Treat My Abusive Parents?
http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/questions/parentingandfamily/honormymotherandfather.html

What Does It Mean to Honor Your Parents? (in this case, when a parent has dementia)
http://www.newhopenow.com/ask/honor_parents.html

© 2006 Probe Ministries

See Also:

"You Are Sending the Wrong Message to People About Dealing with Flawed Parents"