

Honor Your Father and Mother – The Ministry of Children  
Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 15:1-11  
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Today's theme is the ministry of children. "Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 5:16 (ESV))

We often think of "Honor your father and mother" as a commandment for children. We usually interpret it to mean that children are to obey their parents, doing what they have been told to do without back-talking or sassing their parents. This is certainly one aspect of this commandment. Obedience in a loving, Christ-centered family promotes a sense of order and teamwork and teaches discipline and self-control.

However, I want us to look at this commandment and the ministry of children from a different viewpoint.

I want to describe the ministry of children as taking your place at the table.

You need to use your imagination and pretend that this table is much bigger than it really is. Pretend this is a dining room table with room enough for everyone in the family. The dining room table image is about something more than dinner. It is about the roles and relationships we have in our families when we are children and when we are adults.

Take your place at the table.

When a child is born into a family, the family makes room for this new person. In other words, a place is made for the child. This may best be represented by having a place at the table. Chairs are adjusted and places shifted around so that the new person has a place. As the child grows from a high chair at the table to a booster seat (or a stack of telephone books) and then to a regular chair, both the parents and the child are learning about the unique gifts and personality of the child. The parents have the responsibility of guiding and nurturing the child. The child grows into new responsibilities that contribute to the life of the family. Household chores and yard work were some of the ways I contributed to the life of my family. There were a lot of other ways I wanted to use my time other than washing the dishes, mowing the lawn or pulling weeds, but doing these chores were my contribution and my responsibility. I honored my parents by doing these tasks. This was one way I ministered to my family.

At the family table there needs to be room for give and take. I am an advocate of the idea that children are to be heard as well as seen. Children's voices are important. Children are to be appreciated. Children are not just chore-workers. Children bring their own gifts to the family table and to family life.

One of the great joys of the toddler years with our daughter was coming home from work and having her run to the door with her arms raised in order to be picked up, saying, “Hi, Daddy!” Her example reminded me that God enjoys it when I come to God with joy and with open arms that demonstrate a trust in God’s love and goodness. My daughter taught me about trusting my heavenly Father. This was her ministry to me.

We can encourage the ministry of our kids and grand-kids, nieces and nephews, and the children of this church when we give them a place at the table – a place in the life of our homes and our church. They minister to us when we allow their examples of faith and joy to lead us to a deeper relationship with God and with them.

As we grow up around the family table, our roles, responsibilities and relationships change. It became my responsibility to set the table, then later to wash the dishes. In later childhood and early teen years I learned how to cook simple things like cookies and pancakes and spaghetti. I also took on other chores such as mowing the lawn. I was taking a new place at the table and in the family. I moved away to college and graduate school, but there was always a place at the family table.

We honor our parents when we take our place at the table even as the relationships and roles shift over time.

As our parents grow older, our place at the table shifts once again. We prepare the food and we make sure our parents have what they need. The meaning of honoring our father and mother takes on new characteristics. We shift from being the care receivers to becoming the caregivers. Our once strong and dependable parents may become weak, forgetful and dependent on the help of others. We are called upon to take a new role of looking after the welfare of our parents.

The ministry of children now becomes the ministry of adult children. We find this ministry of adult children highlighted in Jesus’ discussion with the religious leaders in Matthew 15. The topic of their discussion is the importance of following the commandments of God, not the specifics of how to care for aging parents. However, Jesus’ example of caring for older parents sheds light on the importance of our ministry as adult children.

The religious leaders complained to Jesus that his disciples dishonored God’s law because they did not wash their hands before they ate. (I find it intriguing that such a parent-child topic of washing up before dinner is the conversation starter.) The religious leaders failed to understand that the condition of the heart is more important than the physical cleanliness of the hands. Jesus told them that they were the ones breaking God’s commands when they failed to provide for parents in their old age. Adult children were expected to care for their parents. However, the religious leaders interpreted the law of God in a way that allowed adult children to dedicate some of their money to God (called “Corban”). That money could not be used for the parents’ care. It would be like putting it in a trust to be invested and later given to a church charity fund. We don’t know how this idea got started, but Jesus pointed out that this practice went against the commandment to honor father and mother. Leaving one’s parents destitute and helpless in later life does not honor them.

In the context of real life relationships with parents, we find the role of the adult child caregiver to be a very complex and sometimes very difficult. Our parents may not want the help we think they need. We may feel guilty about what we are not able to do for them because of distance, job responsibilities or family obligations. We may feel resentment because of past experiences, present demands or the lack of help from our brothers or sisters. We feel sad when we see our parents lose their health and their strength. We also may feel a sense of opportunity to care for those who cared for us. Others are appreciative to have their parents alive even if they have lost some of their energy.

Every one of us has to figure our own way through the ministry of caring for our parents as they grow older. There is no one right way to do it. Different people make different choices that are equally good given their circumstances.

I recently came across three suggestions for caregivers that I want to pass on to you. These suggestions are relax, reconnect and rejoice.

The load of caregiving can be very heavy. The load can weigh us down. The load can be very upsetting. Caregivers need to learn to relax. By this I mean that caregivers need to learn good self-care. Caregivers need to find time for themselves and their needs. Releasing guilt is important, also. We all feel some level of guilt as caregivers. (I feel guilty that I am not closer to family and I feel guilty that sometimes I am glad I am not close to family.) Do what you can and what you need to do, but give yourself some time and some slack, realizing that you can't do everything. Thinking about the table, it is exhausting to do the whole Thanksgiving dinner by yourself from beginning to end – especially if you think you have to do it perfectly. It is even more exhausting to carry the whole load of caregiving by yourself.

Caregivers also need to reconnect. Dinnertime around the table at our home means reconnecting. We talk about our day and about how we are doing. We support each other.

Reconnecting with others means making connections, both old and new. Find ways to connect with your parents that are meaningful. It is often a time to tell and re-tell family stories. Maybe it is time to write the stories down. Look at picture albums. For those with dementia, find ways to connect as person to person.

Connect with family and friends that can help. Make new connections. Connect with community resources.

Don't go through this alone. Talk about it with your parents, with family and friends. The church can be a resource through learning from the experiences of others and contacts for community resources. Support groups are available in our community. Resources for caregiving are available in our community and in most other cities around the country. These resources include nursing homes when that is what is needed. Nursing facilities can allow the family caregiver to continue a role of caregiving when the work at home has become too much.

Caregivers need to rejoice. The time at the table can include times of joy. In our home, the talk around the dinner table is about the good things in our day as well as the struggles. Family life has its joys and its challenges. Caregiving is work. But many caregivers find joy and many positive aspects to caregiving. It is a time to give back. It is a time to share with parents. It is a time to be stretched and grow in the process.

As kids we have the ministry of taking our place in the family and demonstrating the joy and trust of a child-like faith. As adult children we take our place at the table by providing for our parents at the table. The ministry of children and the ministry of adult children find their source at a larger table, the Lord's Table. The Lord's Table is where we receive the love of God and the servanthood of Christ into our lives. Then we go out on Monday mornings to take our place at the tables in our homes and in other places in the community. We come to church to be renewed by God, then we go out to live the Christian life in the real relationships of daily living – as kids and as adult children and in the other relationships we have in life.