

Good News for Parents

One honor we can do our parents is to let them down off the pedestal of our imaginations.

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♦ "YOU shall not kill. You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall honor your father and your mother."

One might wonder why there is need for a commandment that parents be honored. Killing, stealing, lying—these are clearly serious offenses, and the reasons for their prohibition are not hard to discern. But they make rather grim company for the Fifth Commandment (or, according to some, the Fourth), especially since honoring one's parents might seem a sentiment hardly in need of enforcement. Yet there it is, squarely in the middle of the Decalogue. "You shall honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God gives you." Since in the weeks ahead the Florists Transworld Delivery Association will nourish the admonition to honor mother and father, and, yes, even grandparents, for motives quite other than those which were Moses', it might be beneficial to reflect upon the significance of this commandment from the standpoint of our religious tradition in an attempt to keep a balanced perspective.

I

It is important to note, in the first place, that the Fifth Commandment follows those commandments that are intended to establish the sanctity, holiness and utter authority of God. You shall have no other Gods . . . You shall make no images of God . . . You shall not take the name of God lightly . . . You shall not dishonor the day set apart for the worship of God. And you shall honor your father and your mother. The first five commandments deal with the principal authorities in human life—God and the parents. Indeed, parents do occupy a position in the lives of their children that is almost godlike. It is one of the things that make being a parent so awesome. And Freud, of course, regarded God as our childhood's experience of parental power, dimly recalled and projected upon a mysterious universe.

Can you recall what it was like to be a child looking up at an adult? Shoes as big as your whole body. A belt buckle

as big as your face. A pair of hairy nostrils over which peer huge eyes. In a split second arms can reach down and snatch you five body-lengths distant from the floor to a tabletop. The strength of parents cannot be resisted. They have the power to give and to withhold food and affection. Their anger can turn your body rigid. Their soothing voice and touch can lull you to blissful sleep.

Freud rightly discerned the powerful influence of parental authority in shaping children's fears and fantasies. But he missed the significance of his own Jewish heritage's insistence that the power and authority of God are holy, and that that which is due to God must not be confused with that which is due to parents. Both God and parents are powerful authorities throughout our lives. But God is holy, the unnameable, wholly other. Parents are creatures, instruments of creation, deserving of honor but not to be confused with the final authority, the final power, which is God's alone.

This is a distinction that Jesus reportedly understood at an early age. When he was a young adolescent, on his first trip to the great city of Jerusalem, his parents lost track of him. When, after three days of searching, they found him in the temple debating with the elders, he rebuked their anxiety with a question: Why are you looking for me? Did you not know I would be in my Father's house? It is a distinction he carried into his adult years when he taught his disciples that being his followers might mean having to sever relationships with their mothers and their fathers if those relationships challenged the authority of God in their lives.

II

Parents are the instruments of creation and the bearers of love in our lives, and they are to be honored. But they are not God, and are not to be confused with God, obeyed as if their word expressed the absolute holiness of God.

This is one of the great applications of the good news of Jesus Christ. He proclaims liberty to the captives—to those children whose parents try to assume the power of God in their lives, parents who demand unquestioning obedience, parents for whom children

are property, extensions of their own egos, their own powers in the world. The gospel proclaims the priority of God in the life of the child. The honor due parents follows after the commandment "You shall have no other gods before me."

This is good news for children, but it is good news for parents as well. For if children honor their parents as parents instead of obeying them as gods, then parents once again have a chance to be people, to be human, to be creatures, to be themselves. The past 70 years have been rather hard for parents in our society. They have suffered under a misunderstanding fostered by some branches of psychology which implied that parents were to blame for every hare-brained thing their children did wrong. Nor have children been slow to exploit the power this distorted view of human relations has fostered. As the streetwise delinquent of *West Side Story* explains in "Gee, Officer Krupke!": "Our mothers all are junkies, our fathers all are drunks; golly Moses, naturally we're punks!"

I have been teaching courses in child development for ten years. One of the painful things through the years has been the appearance in class of a super-mother, one who has read every book on child psychology she could get her hands on, has found out that most of them disagree with each other about a number of things, and is immobilized with the fear that if she frowns at her two-year-old when he throws his oatmeal on the cat the child will develop a complex and join the Hell's Angels when he is 17.

Such parents know, rightly, that they are important authorities in their children's lives. But in their anxiety over this awesome responsibility they lose sight of the other forces at work in the life of their child, or they confine the child anxiously within their own orbit rather than trust the child to influences beyond their control. But parents are not expected to be gods in their children's lives. Indeed, they had better not try to be. What they can be is fallible. What they can have is needs of their own. What they need not be is as consistent as a computer. And what their child will know is what it means to be

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loved by a human being, which is not really such a bad thing to learn as a child!

Honor your father and your mother. Negatively, it means not to confuse parents with God in your life. Positively, it means to accept them as they are — human beings, frail creatures whom God loves no less than God loves little children. And when parents get to be 60 or 70 years old, they have not ceased to be God's children. That they did not have total wisdom when they raised us, that they did not always know exactly what to tell us, what to let us do and what to prevent us from doing, does not mean they did not love us and intend to do well by us. Perhaps the greatest honor we can do our parents is to let them down off the pedestal of our imaginations, where we are inclined either to idolize them or to flog them as gods who failed (as indeed they must fail), and to accept them as people — people who need forgiveness as well as respect, who need honest relationships with their children perhaps more than with anyone else.

But this is difficult. I do not think we honor anyone by being dishonest, and there is no relationship in life more filled with ambivalence than the relationships between parents and children. These conflicting, contradictory feelings are hard to acknowledge to ourselves, hard to acknowledge to them. Perhaps this is why we are *commanded* to honor them.

Parents are those persons who give us

life and the means to live it, and who set limits to our living it.

"Have a piece of cake . . . but only one piece."

"Here is a new dress for you . . . don't get it dirty."

"I want you to make your own decisions . . . your mother and I will be terribly disappointed if you don't do well."

"Always be honest with others . . . but don't hurt their feelings."

Parents are those persons from whom we want to be free and independent, and to whom we want to be able to turn when independence becomes terrifying.

Parents are those persons we do not want telling us how to live our lives, especially when we are living with them. And they are often the first persons we want to talk to when we have problems about what to do in life.

III

We have mixed feelings about our parents, most of us. Honoring our parents means being honest about those feelings, honest about them to ourselves so that we can enter into forgiving, accepting, loving, grateful relationships with our parents.

There is something of this ambivalence in Jesus' relationships with his mother. Of course she worried about him, wanted to know what he was about in his travels. Of course she would try to see him when his ministry brought him near to Nazareth. She was probably perplexed

by his passion to preach, which seemingly showed greater concern for the larger family of Israel than for his own family at home.

But Jesus used the analogy of the closest human ties he knew to express the urgency of his message of the Kingdom, the analogies of relations between parents and children, father and son, a father's great love, a sibling's jealousy. When he found persons who rationalized their neglect of their parents by saying there were really more important religious causes to support, he showered them with his wrath and scorn. We do not honor God by dishonoring our parents, even as we are clear to acknowledge who is the Creator and who is the creature. And so at his death Jesus' concern for the welfare of his mother is shown; he required John now to take responsibility for her care.

The ambivalence, the mixture of feelings which are the stuff of parent-child relationships — these take a lifetime of living to understand, to realize, to accept. It is grace that opens us to honesty in the honor we show.

We do not know, when we are young, what it is like to grow old. The commandment to honor our fathers and our mothers, to treat them honestly, with acceptance, with forgiveness, can keep us attuned to the truth of our own mortality, to the truth that we, too, are aging children who one day, if we keep the commandment, may have children who will honor us with honesty, forgiveness and acceptance. □