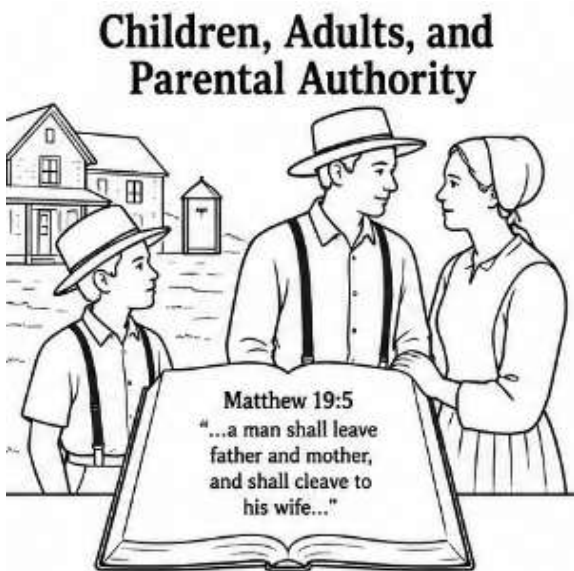




Is Obeying Your Parents the First Commandment?

On numerous occasions, I have heard well-meaning parents ask their children, “Don’t you know that obeying your parents is the first commandment in the Bible?” Usually, the parent is trying to teach the importance of obedience and respect. Those are important lessons, and Scripture clearly teaches that children should obey their parents. However, we must be careful not to make a Bible passage say something it does not say.



The passage most often used to support this statement is Ephesians 6:1-3:

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

At first glance, someone may read these verses and conclude that obeying one’s parents is the first commandment found in the Bible. However, that is not what Paul said. He did not call parental obedience “the first commandment.” He referred to honoring one’s father and mother as “the first commandment with promise.”

Those final two words are important. The verse does not simply say “the first commandment.” It says, *“the first commandment with promise.”* When we leave out the words *“with promise,”* we change the meaning of the passage.

Paul was pointing his readers back to the Ten Commandments given through Moses. Exodus 20:12 says:

“Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”

This was the fifth of the Ten Commandments, not the first commandment in the Bible and not even the first of the Ten Commandments. However, it was the first commandment in that list that included a promise for those who obeyed it. The promise was that their days might be long upon the land God had given them.

Paul repeated that promise in Ephesians:

“That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

The point is not that obeying one’s parents was the first command God ever gave. The point is that honoring one’s father and mother was the first of the Ten Commandments that came with a stated promise of blessing.

This may seem like a small difference, but words matter, especially when we are teaching the Word of God. We should never add to a passage, remove important words from it, or use it to support an idea that the passage itself does not teach. Even when our intentions are good, we should handle Scripture carefully and explain it accurately.

Therefore, rather than saying, *“Obeying your parents is the first commandment in the Bible,”* it would be more accurate to say, *“Honoring your father and mother is the first commandment with promise.”* That wording follows the text and preserves the meaning Paul intended.

Children, Adults, and Parental Authority

The group Paul addressed in Ephesians 6:1-3 were children, not married adults. Some parents continue to view their sons and daughters as children even when they are 30, 40, or 50 years old. Because of that, they may believe their grown children are still required to obey them in the same way they did when they were young children and living at home.

However, we must carefully consider the context in which Paul wrote these words. Scripture should not be separated from its context and applied in a way that ignores the people being addressed.

In Ephesians 5, Paul spoke directly to **wives** and **husbands**. He explained the responsibilities that come with marriage. Then, in Ephesians 6, he addressed **children, fathers, servants, and masters**. Each group had a different role, and each role carried its own responsibilities.

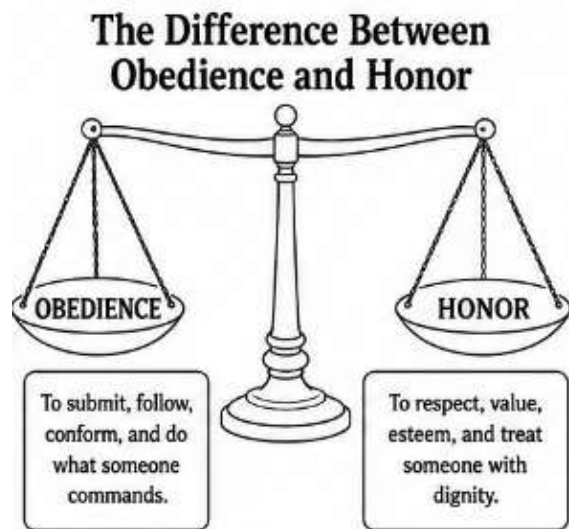
Paul did not speak to **husbands** as though they were still **children** under their parents’ authority. He did not speak to **fathers** as though they were required to remain under the control of their own **father and mother**. In the same way, he did not treat **masters** as **servants** or **servants** as **masters**. Each

person was expected to understand and fulfill the responsibilities connected to his or her present position in life.

A person may always remain someone's **son** or **daughter** by birth, but that does not mean the person remains a **child** in the same sense for the rest of life. **Childhood** is a stage of life. **Adulthood** is another stage and brings new responsibilities, new decisions, and often a new household.

Jesus repeated an important Old Testament truth:

"For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh" (Matthew 19:5).



Notice the words, *"shall a man leave father and mother."* The verse does not say that a **boy** shall leave. It says that a **man** shall leave. He has grown up and is now expected to act like an **adult**. He is no longer under his **parents'** daily direction in the same way he was as a **child**.

To leave **father** and **mother** does not necessarily mean that a person must move far away, cut off communication, or reject the relationship. It means that the primary **family** relationship changes. Before marriage, the parents' home was his home. After marriage, he and his **wife** form a new household.

The verse also says that the man shall *"cleave to his wife."* To cleave means to hold closely, remain joined, and be faithful. His **wife** is not added beneath his **parents** in the family structure. **Husband** and **wife** become one flesh, and they must learn to make decisions together before God.

This means that married **adults** should not be treated as though they are still young **children** who must receive permission for every decision. **Parents** may give counsel, share concerns, and offer wisdom, but the married couple must accept responsibility for their own home, marriage, and future.

This does not mean **adults** should stop honoring their **parents**. God's command to honor **father** and **mother** does not end when a person reaches adulthood or gets married. Jesus said:

"For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and he that curseth father or mother, let him die the death" (Matthew 15:4).

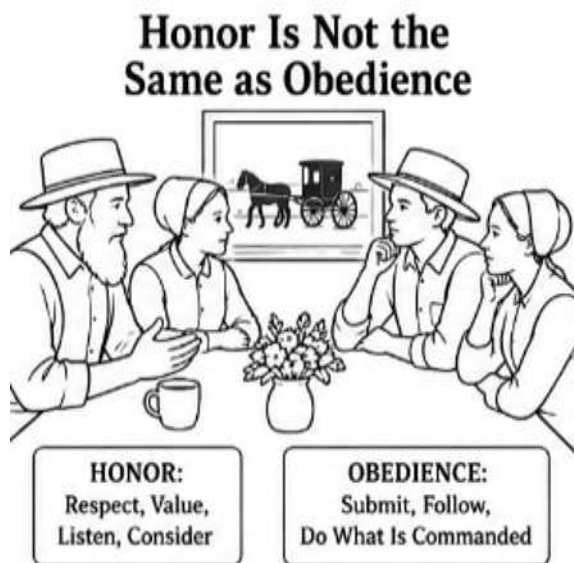
Adults should still speak respectfully to their **parents**. They should value their **parents**, listen to their concerns, and care for them when possible. They should not mock them, despise them, or treat them as though they no longer matter.

At the same time, honoring **parents** does not mean that grown **adults** must surrender every personal decision to them. A married **son** may honor his **parents** while choosing a different occupation, attending a different church, raising his **children** differently, or living in another community. A **daughter** may honor her **parents** while respectfully declining a request that would harm her marriage or interfere with the responsibilities God has given her.

Children who are still under their parents' care are commanded to obey them. Grown **adults** are still commanded to honor their **parents**, but honor and obedience are not always the same thing. Obedience belongs to the **child's** position under **parental** authority. Honor continues throughout life, even when an **adult** must make a decision with which the **parents** do not agree.

Obedience and Honor: What's the Difference?

Obedience and honor are closely connected, but they are not the same. **TO OBEY MEANS** to submit, follow instructions, conform, and do what someone commands. Obedience normally involves allowing another person to direct a decision or action.



TO HONOR MEANS to respect, value, esteem, and treat someone with dignity. Honor is shown through our words, attitudes, and actions. A person may honor his father and mother by listening carefully, speaking kindly, showing gratitude, and taking their concerns seriously.

Honor does not require a grown son or daughter to agree with every opinion, follow every suggestion, or accept every decision made by a parent. Disagreement is not automatically dishonor. Much depends on how that disagreement is handled.

A person can disagree in a proud, angry, and disrespectful way. He may interrupt, mock, insult, or refuse to listen. That would not be honoring his parents. However, a person may also disagree calmly and respectfully. He can listen to his parents, consider their concerns, thank them for their counsel, and still make a different decision.

Suppose a man and woman marry and establish their own home. Later, the husband's parents decide to move to another part of the country. They want their married son and his wife to move with them, so they strongly encourage the couple to follow.

The husband may deeply love and respect his parents. He may understand why they want him nearby. He may also appreciate the sacrifices they made for him while he was growing up. Still, he

must remember that he is now married and that his decision will affect his wife, their home, their work, their church, their finances, and possibly their children.

The wife may believe that moving would not be best for their family. Perhaps she has important responsibilities where they live. Perhaps the move would create financial hardship, take them away from needed support, or place unnecessary strain on their marriage. Her concerns should not be ignored simply because the request came from her husband's parents.

The couple should listen respectfully to the parents and carefully consider what they are asking. They should not respond carelessly or make the parents feel that their wishes do not matter. They can ask questions, discuss the possible advantages and disadvantages, and take time to think through the decision.

However, the husband's parents should not expect to make the final decision for the couple. The husband and wife must make that decision together. They are the ones who will live with the results, and they are responsible for the home and family God has entrusted to them.

The couple may finally decide that moving would not be wise. They can communicate that decision with kindness. They might say, "We love you, and we understand why you would like us to move with you. We have carefully considered it, but we do not believe it is the right decision for our family."

By answering this way, they are not rejecting the parents as people. They are simply declining the request. They can continue loving, respecting, visiting, calling, and caring for the parents even though they have chosen not to move.

This is an important difference. Obedience would mean that the married couple must move because the parents told them to do so. Honor means that they listen respectfully, carefully consider the request, and respond with love and dignity, even if their final answer is no.

A married couple must remember that they have become one flesh. Their first human responsibility is now to one another and to the family God has entrusted to them. Parents may still offer wisdom and counsel, but they should not control the decisions of their married children.

Adult sons and daughters should never use their independence as an excuse to become selfish, cold, or disrespectful. At the same time, parents should not use the command to honor father and mother as a way to demand control over the lives, marriages, or homes of their grown children.

True honor does not require blind agreement. It requires respect, patience, gratitude, and dignity. A grown son or daughter may say no to a parent's request and still honor that parent in a godly way.

Obeying Parents “In the Lord”

Ephesians 6:1 says, “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right.*”

The words “*in the Lord*” are very important. Paul did not simply say, “*Children, obey your parents.*” He added a clear boundary. A child’s obedience to his parents must remain under the authority of the Lord.

Parents have real authority, but their authority is not unlimited. They are not free to command anything they please and then use Scripture to demand obedience. Their authority must be exercised in a way that agrees with the character, truth, and commands of God.

In most cases, children should obey their parents even when they do not fully understand the reason for a rule. Parents often know more about danger, responsibility, and consequences than their children do. A child may not like being told to finish his work, speak respectfully, stay away from

harmful influences, or follow the rules of the home, but those instructions are not sinful. Obedience in such matters is right and pleasing to the Lord.

However, we live in a fallen world. Not every parent walks with God, and even godly parents can make wrong decisions. Some children may be told to lie, hide wrongdoing, mistreat another person, participate in sin, or remain silent about something harmful. When a parent commands something that is clearly contrary to God’s Word, the child’s highest responsibility is to obey God.

The child should still respond with as much

respect as possible. He should not use the words “in the Lord” as an excuse for rebellion, stubbornness, or disobedience over ordinary family rules. Personal dislike is not the same as a biblical conviction. The question is not, “Do I want to obey?” The question is, “Can I obey this command without disobeying God?”

This principle is found throughout Scripture. God has placed people in different positions of authority, but no human authority is greater than His. Parents, husbands, pastors, church leaders, employers, and government officials are all under the authority of God. None of them has the right to command another person to sin.

When the apostles were ordered to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, Peter and the other apostles answered:

“*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29).



They were not rejecting authority because they disliked it. They were refusing a command that directly opposed the command of Christ. Their loyalty to God had to come first.

The same principle applies within the family. A parent should never require a child to place family loyalty above loyalty to Christ. A child should not be taught that obeying a parent means ignoring conscience, hiding evil, or disobeying the clear teaching of Scripture.

The same is true in every other relationship. A husband must not be placed above Christ. A wife must not be placed above Christ. A parent, child, pastor, bishop, minister, or church leader must never take the place that belongs only to the Lord.

Jesus Christ must always come first.



Jesus said:

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

"For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

"And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me"
(Matthew 10:34-37).

Jesus was not teaching His followers to become argumentative, disrespectful, or eager for division. He was warning them that following Him would sometimes create division, even within their own families.

A person may come to believe the gospel while his family rejects it. He may choose to follow Scripture while his parents insist that he follow family traditions. He may be pressured to deny what he believes, remain in a religious system he no longer accepts, or keep quiet about his faith in Christ.

In such situations, following Jesus may bring pain, misunderstanding, rejection, or conflict. A son may deeply love his father and still refuse to deny Christ. A daughter may respect her mother and still choose to follow the Word of God rather than family expectations.

This does not mean believers should look for reasons to fight with their families. We should seek peace whenever possible. We should speak with kindness, show patience, and avoid unnecessary arguments. We should make it clear that our disagreement is not based on hatred or pride, but on our desire to remain faithful to Christ.

At the same time, peace must never be purchased by disobeying God. Family unity is precious, but it is not more important than truth. A peaceful relationship with parents cannot take the place of a right relationship with Jesus Christ.

The words “*in the Lord*” protect both children and parents. They remind children that obedience is part of following Christ. They also remind parents that their authority must remain under Christ.

Children should obey their parents in all things that are right. Parents should give instructions that are consistent with God’s Word. When human authority and God’s authority come into conflict, God must always come first.

When Parental Authority Becomes Abuse

It is heartbreaking to hear about children who have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused by their own parents. The home should be a place of safety, love, care, and protection. When a parent uses his or her position to harm a child, that parent has violated both the trust of the child and the authority God has given.

A child is not required to commit sinful abuse. Obedience to parents does not mean accepting violence, sexual wrongdoing, threats, manipulation, or cruelty. No parent has the right to use

Ephesians 6:1 as a weapon to frighten a child into silence.

When a parent acts in a wicked or abusive way, that parent is not acting “*in the Lord*.” God has nothing to do with the filth of abuse. The guilt belongs to the abuser, not to the child.

Children who are being harmed are often afraid to speak. They may be threatened, blamed, or told that no one will believe them. They may even be taught that telling someone would be rebellion against their parents. That is not true. Speaking up about abuse is not rebellion. It is asking for protection from evil.



A child who is being harmed should seek help from a trustworthy adult who will take the situation seriously. This may be a safe family member, teacher, counselor, pastor, doctor, or law enforcement officer. If the first person does not listen, the child should keep telling until someone acts to protect him or her.

Removing a child from an abusive situation is not rebellion against God. It is protection from sin and danger. The Lord does not command children to remain trapped where they are being harmed. He does not require them to protect the reputation of an abusive parent, family, church, or community.

Jesus came to deliver people from the bondage and destruction of sin, not to force them to submit to it. His concern for children is clear throughout Scripture. He welcomed them, blessed them, and warned those who would cause them harm.

Jesus gave one of the strongest warnings in Scripture concerning those who harm children:

“And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea” (Mark 9:42).

These are serious words. Jesus was not careless about the suffering of children. He did not excuse those who abused their authority. He warned that bringing harm to a child is a fearful offense before God.

Jesus continued by warning that sin must be dealt with seriously and without compromise:

“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:43).

Jesus was teaching that sin must never be protected, excused, or treated lightly. It must be confronted and forsaken. No family relationship, church position, or personal reputation is more important than protecting a child and bringing hidden sin into the light.

No parent, family member, pastor, bishop, minister, counselor, or religious leader has the right to use Scripture to control, exploit, silence, or abuse another person. Spiritual authority does not give anyone permission to sin.

Children should obey their parents in the Lord, but abuse is never “in the Lord.” Adults should honor their parents, but honoring a parent does not mean covering up evil, remaining in danger, or pretending that abuse did not happen.

Every person’s highest loyalty belongs to Jesus Christ. No earthly relationship should ever be used to excuse sin, demand ungodly obedience, or keep someone trapped in abuse.

Mission to Amish People

575 US Highway 250

Greenwich, OH 44837

(419) 962-1515