

THE SERMONS OF JOHN WESLEY SERIES
SERMON 3: ON OBEDIENCE TO PARENTS
Colossians 3:20

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Language edited and updated by J. Thomas Johnson – Sunday, June 19, 2022

[Given that today is Father’s Day on the secular calendar, I wanted to choose a sermon to revisit in which Wesley discussed parenting or children. I narrowed my search down to three sermons: “On Family Religion,” “On the Education of Children,” and “On Obedience to Parents.”

There are perhaps few practices that have changed more in western cultures between the 1700s and today than those involved in the raising and educating of children. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to revisit Wesley’s sermons on family and parenting today. Much of the language he used and the assumptions he held are not only different than those employed today, but the assumptions of 16th century England about parenting were often in contradiction to the assumptions of today. Therefore, of the three sermons I was considering, I chose the one I felt was the least cultural and most Biblical.

Even so, I have had to update Wesley’s language, and perhaps in updating it, I could be accused of having changed it. For instance, Wesley often spoke about *breaking a child’s will*. Hearing that language today, it sounds as though Wesley was encouraging parents to exercise a type of abusive control of their children. However, given that Wesley believed and taught frequently on Biblical love as the inheritance of all Christians and that love was patient, kind, self-controlled, not given to fits of rage, and so on, it seems impossible that Wesley meant that parents should be abusive, short-tempered, or out of control with their children. So, I have translated Wesley’s commendation to break a child’s will into the language of curbing a child’s self-centered willfulness or rebelliousness. I’m convinced this is essentially what Wesley meant, but perhaps I have altered his meaning a bit with that translation.

Also, in the midst of this sermon, Wesley spent considerable time condemning the wearing of elegant clothing, encouraging parents both to model and to instruct their children in the virtue of dressing plainly. Again, this is a subject that is out of step with most contemporary assumptions about Christian behavior. However, I think there is something deeply wise and deeply biblical about what Wesley was commending. Therefore, when we get to that part of the sermon, I will provide some explanatory comments that I hope will help to bring Wesley’s concerns to today’s issues. Well, without further ado, let’s consider Wesley’s sermon “On Obedience to Parents.”]

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord (Colossians 3:20).

Are there any innate principles shared by all people? [Is there such a thing as natural law? Is there a sort of a universal conscience that is present in all people, in all places, at all times?] This subject has been disputed over many centuries, perhaps millennia. Even so, one principle that seems to have been embraced in a great diversity of cultures throughout history is the idea that children should honor their parents. . . .

And wherever God has revealed His will to humans, this teaching has been a part of that revelation. In fact, it is in the revelation of God that the principle of honoring one's parents has been reaffirmed, enlarged considerably, and enforced strongly. In the Covenant of Sinai, those who did not honor their parents were to be put to death. And this was one of the laws that our blessed Lord Jesus did not come to destroy, but to fulfill. Therefore, Jesus, [in Mark 7:9-13,] severely reprimanded the Scribes and the Pharisees for nullifying the command to honor one's parents through their traditions. Jesus' teachings should, therefore, reveal to us that the obligation to honor one's parents applies not only to Ancient Israel, but also to Christians.

This is substantially what the Apostle Paul was communicating to the Ephesians when he wrote:

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right (Ephesians 6:1, NASB).

And, again, in writing to the Colossians:

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord (Colossians 3:20, NASB).

We can see that Paul supports this responsibility with three reasons. First, in his letter to the Ephesians he added, "for this is right." In other words, obeying one's parents is a matter of righteousness, not simply of mercy. Obedience is what parents are due—it is what we owe them for the life we have received from them. Secondly, "This is pleasing to the Lord." It is especially pleasing to the great Father of humans and of angels that we should pay honor and obedience to our earthly parents. Thirdly, it "is the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2, NASB). This is the first commandment of God in which God attached a promise—namely, "SO THAT IT MAY TURN OUT WELL FOR YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH" (Ephesians 6:3, NASB). This promise has been generally understood to include health, earthly blessings, and long life. And we have seen many evidences that it belongs not only to the Covenant of Sinai, but also to the promises of God to Christians. Many remarkable instances of God's faithfulness to this promise can be seen today.

But what did Paul mean to commend when he said, "Children, obey your parents in everything?" I will endeavor, with the assistance of God, first to explain Paul's meaning, and then to apply it.

First, I will endeavor to explain the Scripture's meaning, particularly because so few people seem to understand this teaching. Look around the world—and not the non-Christian world, but the Christian world specifically—, among Bible-believing Christians who have access to the Bible in their own language, and how many appear to have ever heard of this teaching? Here and there a child obeys his or her parent out of fear or perhaps out of love or affection. But how many children can you find that obey their fathers and mothers out of a sense of duty to God? And how many parents can you find today who consistently place this responsibility upon their children? I wonder if a vast majority both of parents and of children are totally ignorant of this whole subject. For the sake of those who may be unaware of God's requirements in this respect, I will discuss it as plainly as I can. But still, I am quite aware that those who are unwilling to be convinced will not understand me at all. It will be as though I were speaking in Hebrew or Greek.

It is quite clear that by *parents* the Apostle Paul meant both fathers and mothers, as he referred his readers to the fifth commandment, which names both the one and the other. However human laws

throughout history may vary, the law of God does not distinguish between mothers and fathers. The obligation given to children is to obey them both.

But before we consider *how* we are to obey our parents, perhaps we might first ask *how long* we are to obey them. Are children to honor and obey their parents only until they can walk, or until they go to school, or until they can read and write, or until they are as tall as their parents, or until they graduate from high school or college? No. If children were to obey their parents only because they were afraid of punishment, or because they depended on them for food and shelter, what honor would there be in such obedience? Only those who honor and obey their parents when they can live without them, and when they neither hope nor fear anything from them, shall receive praise from God.

But is an adult man or woman or a married man or woman under any further obligation to honor and obey his or her parents? With respect to marriage, it is true that “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, NASB); and by the same reasoning, a woman is to leave her father and mother and be joined to her husband. Consequently, there may be some instances in which the responsibilities of marriage must take precedence over one’s responsibility to parents. However, I do not see either in the Scripture or by the scrutiny of reason that marriage either cancels or diminishes the general obligation of children to their parents. Much less does our responsibility to our parents diminish because we have reached twenty-one years of age.

I certainly never behaved as if this was the case myself. When I was in my thirties, I considered my relationship with my father to be the same as when I was ten. And when I was in my forties, I considered myself just as responsible to obey my mother in everything lawful, as I did when I was learning to walk.

But, what is implied in Paul’s instruction: “Children, obey your parents in everything” (Colossians 3:20)? Certainly, the first point of obedience is to do nothing which your father or mother forbids, whether it be a major thing or a minor thing. Nothing should be more obvious than that the prohibition of a parent should bind every conscientious child—unless, of course, that prohibition were to cause us to disobey God.

But, there is more. Obedience can be understood a bit further. A gentle parent may totally disapprove of something that s/he does not expressly forbid. What is the responsibility of a child in these instances? How seriously should this disapproval be taken? Whether a parent has prohibited a behavior or not, a person who wishes to have a clean conscience should be safe and avoid offending a parent unnecessarily. The most honorable decision is certainly to avoid behaviors of which you know your parents disapprove. To do otherwise would imply a degree of disobedience which those of tender conscience would wish to avoid.

The second thing implied in this teaching of Paul is that we should do everything which our father or mother asks, whether it is large or small, provided that what is asked is not contrary to any of the teachings of God. In this way, God has given an honor to parents which even governmental authorities do not have. The Queen of England, for instance, is a sovereign ruler, yet she does not have the power to ask me to do anything unless the law of the land requires it of me. For the queen has no power but to execute the law. The will of the queen is not law to a citizen of England. But the will of a parent is a law to the child, who is bound in conscience to submit, unless submission would result in rebellion against God.

It is with admirable wisdom that God has given us this teaching. When children are weak, the strength of their parents can support them, and when children are ignorant, the wisdom of their parents can guide them until children have strength and understanding of their own. In the same way, the will of parents may guide the wills of their children until they have wisdom and experience to guide themselves. This is, therefore, the very first thing which children must learn—that they are to obey their parents, to submit to their will, in all things. And this must be put into effect long before children can understand the reason for it, and, indeed, long before they are capable of understanding any of the teachings of Christianity.

This is why the Apostle Paul directs all parents to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, NASB). For their self-centered willfulness can be curbed by proper discipline, even in their early infancy, long before they are ready for instruction. This, therefore, is the first responsibility of all parents: From the time a child is able to begin to reason in any degree, parents must curb their self-centered willfulness by accustoming them to submitting to your will, which will prepare them for submitting to the will of their Father Who is in heaven.

But how few children do we find, even at six or eight years old, who understand anything of this? Indeed, how could they understand it, seeing that they have no one to teach them? Are not their parents, both father and mother, as ignorant of this submissiveness as they themselves? Whom can we find, even among Christians, who have the vaguest idea about it? Haven't we all witnessed this ignorance ourselves? Haven't we been present when a father or mother has said to his or her child, “Do so and so,” and the child, without any second thought replied, “No,” and then the parent quietly passed it by without comment? Do we not see that by this cruel indulgence, we are training up our children, by brazen rebellion against their parents, to rebel, eventually, against God? Therefore, we are raising up our children for the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! If any parent really understood this, they would neither eat nor drink nor sleep until they had taught their children better lessons, instilling in them the fear of ever giving that diabolical answer again.

For those parents who fear God, allow me to explore this a little further. If we do fear God, how can we allow a child above a year old to say, “I will do,” what we have forbidden, or “I won't do” what we have asked and to go unpunished? We must confront this self-centered will in our children right away, so that they may be deterred from making a habit of rebelliousness. Have we no compassion for our children, no regard for their salvation or destruction? For those of us who do not allow our children to curse or swear in our presence, we must realize that disobedience is as certain a way to destruction as cursing or swearing. Confront him, confront her, in the Name of God. In the words of Samuel Butler, do not “spare the rod and spoil the child.” Do not surrender your child to his or her own self-centered willfulness, for that will be to surrender them to the devil himself. The Scriptures say, “Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NASB). As painful as it may be for us, we must pluck our children out of the lion's teeth. Teach your children submissiveness that they may not perish. Curb their self-centered willfulness that you may save their souls.

I don't know how to emphasize this sufficiently or to impress it on you more strongly. Permit me to add part of a letter on this subject which was printed some years ago.

“In order to shape the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to curb their self-centered willfulness. To educate them takes time and must progress slowly, but curbing the self-centeredness of their wills is something that must be done from the beginning—

the sooner the better. For if we delay to teach this, they quickly develop a stubbornness, which is extremely difficult to curb later, and often cannot be curbed later without methods we would be loathe to employ. Therefore, I call those parents cruel who are often considered kind and indulgent, who permit their children to develop habits which they know must eventually be broken.

“I insist on curbing the self-centered willfulness of children early, because this is the only foundation for a religious education. When this has been accomplished, then a child becomes capable of being governed by the wisdom of his or her parents until his or her own understanding matures.

“And there is still more to consider. Self-centered willfulness is the root of all sin and misery in the world, so whatever encourages this in children ensures their future misery and faithlessness. Consequently, whatever discourages and restrains it, promotes their future happiness and faithfulness. This should be obvious to those of us who realize that religion is nothing else but doing the will of God, and not our own. So, since self-centered willfulness represents an enormous impediment to both our earthly and eternal happiness, no indulgence of it can be trivial and no curbing of it can be unprofitable. Heaven or hell depends on this alone. So, the parent who works to curb this in his or her children, works together with God in the saving of a soul. But, the parent who indulges self-centered willfulness does the devil’s work, makes Christian faith more difficult, places salvation out of reach, and does all that is in them to condemn their child forever!

“Therefore, I must earnestly repeat what I have already said: curb their self-centered willfulness early, begin this work before they can walk, before they can speak clearly, or perhaps even before they can speak at all. However hard it may be, resist their stubbornness and curb their self-centered willfulness if you would not condemn your child. I beg you, parents, not to neglect this responsibility, nor to delay it! Therefore, let a child from a year old be taught to respect our discipline and not to throw tantrums. In order to accomplish this, we should commit to never allowing our child to have anything he or she cries for—absolutely nothing, large or small, or else we will sabotage our own efforts. From that early age we must, at all costs, ensure that our children do as they are told, no matter how challenging or strenuous we find the endeavor. Don’t let anyone convince you that these efforts are cruel, for it is cruel not to discipline our children’s rebelliousness. If we teach them to curb their self-centered willfulness early, then the call of Jesus to self-denial will be understandable to them later, and perhaps in the future our children may come to bless our sacrificial efforts for all eternity.”

On the contrary, how dreadful are the consequences of that accursed kindness which gives children freedom to follow their own desires and does not teach them the virtue of submissiveness from their infancy? It is primarily due to this that so many Christian parents raise children who end up as atheists or agnostics—even more, children who, as adults, often have no respect for them as parents at all. Why is this? Because their self-centeredness and rebelliousness was not curbed from the beginning; because they were not required from early infancy to obey their parents in all things and to submit to them as unto the Lord; because they were not taught from the time they began to reason that the will of their parents was, for them, the will of God and that to disobey their parents was rebellion against God, and an open door for all manner of ungodliness.

Having explained the teachings of the Apostle Paul in these verses, I will now proceed to apply them. And permit me, first, to apply this text to you who are parents and are concerned with the proper instruction of your children. Do you understand these things yourselves? Are you thoroughly convinced of these important truths? Have you taken them to heart yourselves? Are you putting them into practice with regard to your own children? Have you disciplined your children before they were capable of instruction? Have you confronted their self-centered willfulness from infancy, and do you continue to do so in opposition both to their nature and to this culture's customs? Did you explain to them, as soon as they began to comprehend instruction, your reasons for raising them in this way? Have you taught them that the will of God is the sole law of every intelligent creature, and have you shown them that it is the will of God that they obey you in all things? Do you repeat this over and over again until they perfectly understand it? Never be weary of this labor of love, for your labor will not always be in vain.

At the very least, we must not teach our children to disobey by rewarding them for disobedience. Remember that you do this every time you give them anything because they cry for it. For children are quite intelligent in that if you reward them for crying they will certainly cry again. There will be no end to it unless we make it a sacred rule to give them nothing for which they cry. And the easiest way to accomplish this is never to tolerate their crying aloud out of desire or want. Train them up to obedience in this area, and you will find it easier to bring them to obey in others.

Why not begin today? Certainly, we can see that this is the better way, both for them and for us. Why then do we disobey the Scriptures? Because we are cowards; because we lack perseverance; and because this certainly requires a great deal of patience, far more than we have by nature. But the grace of God is sufficient for us. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). This grace is sufficient to give us both diligence and resolve. Otherwise, laziness will be as great a hindrance as cowardice. For without suffering, we cannot overcome. Nothing can be accomplished with carelessness or sloppiness. Labor on, never tire, teach lesson after lesson until patience has completed its work.

But there is another obstacle that is as difficult to overcome as either laziness or cowardice. It is called fondness or affection, and it is usually mistaken for love. But, O how different from it! Fondness or affection is, in actuality, hate, and hate of the most mischievous kind, leading to the destruction of both body and soul. Do not give way to it any longer, no, not for a moment! Fight against it with all your might, for the love of God, for the love of your children, and for the love of your soul!

I have one more word to say to parents. If, in spite of all the Apostle has said, you encourage your children by your example to adorn themselves with "gold or pearls or expensive apparel," (1 Timothy 2:9, NASB), you and they must drop into the pit together. And even if they do it despite your having set a good example, the fault is still yours as well as theirs. For, even if you have not put any ornament on your child that you would not wear yourself, they would not have done it themselves if you had required them to obey you from their infancy and taught them the responsibility of submissiveness from at least two years old. Whenever, therefore, I see the gaudy-dressed child of plain-dressed parents, I see at once that the parents are defective either in knowledge or in faithfulness. Either the parents are ignorant of their own or their child's responsibility, or the parents have not practiced what they know.

[Wesley's concern here strikes me as a Biblical one. The concern of 1 Timothy 2 is that of a façade that is intended to distract an onlooker from the true heart and character of a person, drawing their attention instead to superficial beauty or affectations. In Wesley's day (and in Paul's day), this was mostly accomplished through dress—clothing, hairstyles, and external adornment. For the Apostle Paul, plainness of dress was not a virtue in and of itself, but it was a means to an end. The point for Paul was

that Christians should be clothing themselves with good works, calling attention to their character and not to superficial masks which project beauty where no true godly beauty exists.

Today, we, too, often dress in such a way as to project something about ourselves that has little to do with our character. But, even more, we also often hide our true character behind branding, profile pictures, social media handles, and so on. Many are very careful to conceal their character, and instead spend a great deal of time crafting a public persona that presents the face to the world that they want the world to see—often an idealized version of who they wish they were or think they should be. Paul's point, and Wesley's was that we should be laboring to be people who do not distract attention from our character with masks, but whose true character is available for all to see and is consistent with that of Jesus. So, Wesley attacked gaudy-dress, but what he was really attacking was the superficial construction of a false-persona that may look godly, but in fact concealed a corrupted heart. In fact, for Wesley, the very desire to adorn oneself with external extravagance was itself an indication that the heart was not being formed by faithfulness to Jesus.]

Wesley continued...

I cannot dismiss this subject yet. I am pained continually at seeing Christian parents allowing their children to run into the same folly of dress as those who are not Christians at all. In God's Name, why do we allow them to vary a hair's breath from the Scripture's teaching? "Because they'll do it anyway." Of course, they will. Whose fault is that? Why did we not curb their self-centered willfulness from infancy? At the very least, we must do it now. It's better late than never. It should have been done before they were two years old. It may still be done at eight or ten, but with far more difficulty. However, do it now and accept the difficulty of it as the just reward for past neglect.

Now, at least, follow through whatever it costs. Do not be wishy-washy like foolish Eli, who said to his wayward sons, "No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the LORD's people circulating," (1 Samuel 2:24, NASB), instead of restraining them with a firm hand. Rather, speak as calmly as possible, but firmly and preemptively, "I will have it this way," and then follow through with what you say. Instill in them consistently the love of plain dress and the hatred of finery. Show them the reason that you choose to dress plainly and explain to them why the same should be true of them. Defy laziness, cowardice, and foolish affection, and always follow through with what you say. If you love your children's souls, make and keep them as plain as yourselves.

And I charge you, grandparents, before God, do not hinder your children's efforts in these respects. Do not dare to give your grandchildren what their parents deny them. Never take the side of your grandchildren against their parents, and never criticize parents in front of their children. If you will not strengthen their authority, as you ought to do, at the very least you must not undermine it. If you have any true devotion to the Christian faith, help your children in the work of loving their children in these ways.

Permit me now to apply the Apostle Paul's teachings to you, children, particularly to you who are children of Christian parents. In fact, if you do not fear God, I am not speaking to you right now. But if you really do fear God and if you have a desire to please Him, then you will have a desire to understand all His commandments, the fifth in particular. Do you understand it now? Do you now understand what your responsibility to your father and mother is? Are you now considering that by God's will your parents' will should be a law to you? Have you ever considered the true extent of the obedience to your parents that God requires of us? The Scriptures say, "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to

the Lord” (Colossians 3:20, NASB). There is no exception to this command unless what your parents require is illegal or against God. Have you done this? Have you even meant to do this?

We must be honest with ourselves. Is your conscience clear in this matter? Do you do nothing which you know to be contrary to the will either of your father or your mother? Do you never do anything which he or she forbids? Do you avoid doing everything which they dislike, as far as you can in good conscience? On the other hand, are you careful to do whatever your parent asks? Do you pay attention to them in order to learn how to please them, to make their lives as easy and pleasant as you can? Whoever here practices this responsibility in their daily lives in order to please God in all things, blessed are you of the Lord. As the Scripture says, “IT MAY TURN OUT WELL FOR YOU, AND YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH” (Ephesians 6:3, NASB).

But as for those who remain unconcerned about this teaching of the Scriptures, who do not consider it a responsibility before God to obey our parents in all things, but choose when and if to obey based on our own sensibilities, who frequently do those things they have forbidden or of which they disapprove and fail to do what they ask, suppose that you awake in the night, begin to feel the weight of your sin, and begin to cry out to God for mercy? Is it any wonder that you find no answer from God while you are guilty of this unrepented sin? How can any of us expect mercy from God until we obey Him by obeying our parents?

But suppose I have, by an uncommon act of mercy, experienced the forgiving love of God. Can I expect, even though I hunger and thirst after righteousness, after the perfect love of God, that I should ever attain these things while I am living in outward sin—that is, in the willful transgression of a known law of God—in disobedience to my parents? Is it not rather amazing that God has not yet withdrawn His Holy Spirit from me, that He still continues to strive with me, though I am continually grieving His Spirit?

Don’t grieve the Spirit of God any longer! By the grace of God, we must obey our parents in all things from this very moment. As soon as we get home, as soon as we set foot within our doors, we must begin a new way of living! We must look upon our parents with new eyes. We must see them as representing our Father Who is in the heavens. We must learn and study, looking forward to pleasing them, to helping them, and to obeying them in all things. We must behave not simply as their child should behave, but as their servant for Christ’s sake, as the Scriptures have taught us. In this way we will truly learn to love one another in ways we did not know before! God will respond by making them a blessing to you and you a blessing to them. And all who witness your relationship will see that God is with you. Many will see your love of each other and praise God, and the results of your love will remain even after you have passed away from this life and into the arms of God. [Amen.]