

PROVERBS

A Devotional for Children on Respect (Proverbs 30:11-13, 17)

The fundamental biblical principle establishing the attitude of a child to a parent is one of honor. The fifth commandment says “honor your father and mother.” What does it mean to honor one’s parents? To honor is a heavy concept. It includes the ideas of obedience, valuing, cherishing and more. Proverbs includes all of those, but one in particular stands out: respect.

Look at Proverbs 30:11-17. Verse 11 begins: “There are those who curse their fathers.” The word for curse is the idea of “lowering.” It means to bring something down below its proper level. To curse one’s parents is to bring them down below the position that they should be in. If you say, my dad is as clueless as Homer Simpson, that’s a curse. If you tell your mother she doesn’t have any idea how life really works, that’s a curse. To curse one’s parents is to use statements about them that are beneath them. To curse one’s parents is to “disrespect” them.

Someone might respond to this saying, “Okay, fine, I know, if you can’t say something nice then don’t say anything at all. If that’s what it means to curse your parents, then I’ll just keep my mouth shut and not talk to them – all that happens when I talk to them is that I say something that I later regret saying.” But look how verse 11 continues. It says, “And do not bless their mothers.” It is not enough simply not to say something demeaning about your parents. God requires that children actually say something positive. To bless someone is the opposite of cursing. It is to acknowledge the good of who they are or what they have done. To respect your parents is to intentionally say words of blessing to them. To verbally thank them for their love and sacrifice for you. To acknowledge how they serve you daily. Respect is both refusing to say something demeaning and to engage in actively blessing.

Some children might think, “But my parents don’t deserve to be blessed. They really are fools! I am not lowering them. They really don’t get it. They don’t even try to see things from my point of view. They don’t deserve respect.” But notice how verse 12 follows verse 11: “Those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth.” Verse 12 is referencing

children who are convinced that their attitudes and actions are right, but God says they are not. Parents do not have to earn the respect of their children. Parents have been given a position by God that deserves respect, much like the position of President of the United States deserves respect whether or not we agree with the decisions of the person in that office. Most Americans were rightly disgusted in 2009 when Representative Joe Wilson from South Carolina shouted out “You lie” during President Obama’s speech on health care to the Congress. Republicans and Democrats both condemned the action because it was disrespectful to the President, who deserved respect not because of his health care plan, but because of his position. Parents have been given a position by God that demands respect. Granted, if a parent blatantly disobeys God, that parent forfeits the respect of their position under God. However, if parents make decisions that children, children’s friends or society do not like, parents do not forfeit that respect. A child who is disrespectful may be innocent in their own eyes, but God considers them guilty.

Keep reading what God says in verse 13 – “those whose eyes are so haughty, whose glances are so disdainful.” What is God talking about here? He is referencing the disrespect that can come without words, but simply through a glance – like when a child rolls her eyes in disgust. Notice how this connects to verse 17 to see how seriously God takes even a look of disrespect from a child to a parent: “The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and will be eaten by the vultures.”

The punishment for disrespecting parents is worth taking note of. Proverbs says ravens from the valley and vultures will pick out your eyes. This is obviously metaphorical. The idea is that creation itself will turn against the child. Because disrespecting parents upsets the order God set up in creation, the punishment is that life falls apart. Nothing in the world is right when a child is not respectful to a parent and therefore the punishment is that things won’t go right in the child’s world until the child begins to respect their parents again.

So here is the key point of Proverbs to children: respect your parents. Speak well of them.

Do not put them down. Do not think them a fool in your heart. This applies even to those of us who are older. After all Proverbs 23:22 says, “listen to your father who gave birth to you and do not despise your mother when she is old.” Children are no longer required to obey their parents after they have grown up, but we are never free from the command to respect them. Even when our parents are old and frail, we are never allowed to despise them. So children – respect your parents.

Some Practical Advice on Discipline

- 1) The main motivation for discipline is love for God. When Eli’s sons were disobedient and remained undisciplined, God asked Eli – why do you honor your sons more than me? (1 Samuel 2:29). It is easier not to discipline than to discipline, but when we do not discipline our children we are training our children to resist God.
- 2) The second motivation for discipline is love for our children. If we impress upon their little minds that negative choices have negative consequences, we will save them from having to learn this when they are older and are making major choices with major consequences. This act of love should be accompanied by words of love for our children before, during and after the time of discipline.
- 3) The goal of discipline is conviction regarding right and wrong, not behavior control. You can train your children to obey, just like you can train a dog to obey, but the goal is for them to understand why. Discipline should come with an explanation. Remember the discipline you administer today is not vindictive punishment, but training for tomorrow so that this won’t happen again.
- 4) The punishment should fit the crime. Lying should merit very serious punishment, while coming home after curfew less serious. Additionally thinking through creative forms of discipline can actually be a way to teach real lessons. For example, if a child is mean to his sibling, instead of simply putting the child in time-out or spanking the child, one could give the offending child all of the injured child’s chores for the day.

- 5) Occasionally discipline should be waved or cut short so that a child can learn about mercy and grace. Doing this too often nullifies its effect. If you really want to give a child a chance to think about God's love for us, on a rare occasion take the punishment they deserve upon yourself. For example if a child deserves to be grounded for what they did, take the punishment yourself and keep yourself home from going golfing with your friends that week.
- 6) The Bible supports the use of corporal punishment, but this should be used carefully and combined with other strategies for discipline. The "rod" in Proverbs is not limited to corporal punishment, but it certainly doesn't exclude it.
- 7) Discipline should be consistent and unified between father and mother. Children should not get lesser punishments from one than the other. Things that are disciplinable events one day need to be disciplinable events on other days, too.
- 8) Try not to discipline in anger. You can speak strongly and with great intensity to a disobedient child to express your frustration and the seriousness of what they did, but talk it over with a spouse, or take time to cool off before deciding on a punishment. If the discipline you have decided seems too strong do not be afraid to revise it down, even apologizing if necessary if your reaction to their disobedience was itself dishonoring to God.
- 9) Different children respond to different forms of discipline at different times in their lives. Some children are more difficult to discipline than others, but all children need discipline.
- 10) It is often useful to ask a child, "what do you think would be proper discipline for what you have done?" This causes a child to think through what they have done and why it is wrong.
- 11) Discipline should not be a choice to get out of doing what they don't want to do. If a child doesn't want to obey a command to clean up their room, the choice should be

either clean the room and avoid discipline or experience discipline and then clean up the room.

For a useful discussion on discipline, see **Disciplines of a Godly Family by Kent and Barbara Hughes.*

Some Comments about Proverbs 22:6

One of the most famous verses in all of Proverbs is relevant to our subject today. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." A few comments are in order about this verse.

There are two possible interpretations of this verse. The first is a more recent interpretation. It claims that the verse is saying that parents should look for the characteristics and traits that children are demonstrating and then steer them toward those paths in life. For example if your child shows a natural disposition toward art, then parents should recognize that and train their children to be artists. Then when they are old they will still be artists because that is their natural disposition. If your child shows aptitude and desire to do math, then encourage her to be a mathematician, send her to math camp and get her into all the advanced math classes you can. This interpretation of this verse, in my opinion, is misguided. Proverbs doesn't care whether our children are mathematician or artists. What Proverbs cares about is whether our children are moral or not. Are they wise with the wisdom of God?

The second possible interpretation (and I think the correct one) is the older interpretation which sees this verse as concerned with the moral education of children. Train a child to live morally and when they are old they will not depart from it.

The reason people shied away from this older interpretation is that we all know plenty of children who were trained morally in the ways that they should go and did not stick with it when they got older. Let me say three things in response to that:

First, Proverbs is talking about moral education here and not behavioralism. What I mean

by that is that if you constantly tell your children that sex before marriage is bad, they may refrain from sex before marriage while they are living with you because you are influencing their behavior with your comments. But notice that Proverbs does not simply say sex outside of marriage is wrong over and over again. What it does it try to explain why sex outside of marriage is such a foolish choice, why it is an offense to God and how God punishes those who engage in it. Proverbs does this by coming at the subject from every different angle possible. That is moral education. That is more likely to stay with a child once they grow up.

Second, many people who do wander away from the morality they have been taught, often return to it later in life. Romans tells us that God uses the conscience to convict people of sin and bring them to true salvation. Moral education in younger years develops a conscience that God will often use when kids are older.

Third, Proverbs does not give us guarantees, it gives us wisdom. Wisdom says, all things being equal this is what will happen. This one verse is not trying to take into account what happens if the child gets in a personality altering car accident, or ends up being abused by a trusted friend or dabbles in the demonic. The point is that if I showed you one child who had been morally trained by his parents and another child who had no moral instruction whatsoever and asked you which one of the two of these is more likely to be a good moral adult, which would you guess? That's the point.