

Honoring Parents Who Are Difficult to Honor

“Honor your parents” was drilled into me as a kid. I don’t remember hearing it directly from my parents, but it was a regular theme in my Sunday School classes. But by the time I was 18, I didn’t hear it anymore. After all, I was becoming an adult—no longer a kid who needed to honor his parents.

Whoa, let’s back this train up. The Bible has no age cap on parental honor. It is a part of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), which applies to all people at all times and in all places. Nothing in God’s statement of these ten commandments says, *“Adults, take a break for the moment. This next commandment is for the kiddos.”*

Honor never goes out of style. We are to honor our parents throughout our lives.

When I became a young adult, I was never tempted to stop honoring my parents. Quite the opposite. I found it easier to honor them. A quote that is often wrongly attributed to Mark Twain says:

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

I never thought my father was ignorant, but with each passing year, I was more drawn to and impressed by his wisdom and understanding of life. So, yeah, I found it easy to honor my father—and my mother.

But what about those who can’t say that? What about those whose parents were hard to honor? Sadly, too many among us had parents who were lousy at parenting. Some were absent. Some were neglectful. Ever worse, some parents are guilty of abuse—verbal, emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse.

How do you honor them?

God placed no conditions on the command to honor. *“Honor those who are honorable.”* It’s not there. We are not responsible for our parents’ actions, but we are responsible for our own—and the command is for us to honor them. Even if your parents are deceased, you are still commanded to honor them.

How seriously does God take this?

- “If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death. He has cursed his father or mother; his death is his own fault” (Lev. 20:9).

- “The one who dishonors his father or mother is cursed.’ And all the people will say, ‘Amen!’” (Deut. 27:16).

Ouch.

- “You are to rise in the presence of the elderly and honor the old. Fear your God; I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:32).

Here are four ways to honor parents who are hard to honor.

Forgive them. Forgiveness is hard—*really* hard. Forgiving does not mean what they did was OK, but forgiving frees you from the weight of anger, bitterness, and hate. Forgiveness is letting go of a painful past and refusing to let that hurt control your present.

If the parent is deceased, you can still forgive. While the parent is no longer alive to hear or receive your forgiveness, the act of forgiving frees you from the past.

Don’t badmouth them. You may find it hard to honor a parent by saying anything good about him or her. If the parent was absentee, you might not even know enough about them to say anything! You don’t have to feign nice words about them, but you certainly won’t be honoring them if you keep telling others the things you don’t like about your parents. In that case, just keep quiet.

Love them. For hard-to-honor-parents, “I love you” can be powerful words to utter. Some parents know they won’t ever receive a “World’s Greatest Dad” coffee mug; they are aware of their failures as parents, so the words “I love you” can be an incredible salve to their wounded souls.

It’s more than words, though. Love needs to be seen. Help them. If needed, provide for them. Do something kind and gracious for them—just because. If forgiveness is hard, acts of love have a way of softening your heart.

Pray for them. Pray for their salvation. Pray for their hearts to turn to Christ. If their behavior or attitude toward you is still less than honorable, pray for God’s conviction in their hearts. Pray for opportunities to love them. As you pray, God will also begin to work on your own heart. Honor God with your prayers for your parents, and He will give you a heart of honor.

Whether our parents are still living or deceased, God blesses our lives as we choose to honor them. *“Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God is giving you”* (Ex. 20:12).