

On Obedience to Parents

by John Wesley

Children must obey their parents in all things, unless it is contrary to God's law, and parents must break their child's will from infancy to ensure their future happiness and piety.

Scripture: Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Proverbs 1:8, Proverbs 22:6, Proverbs 30:17, Matthew 15:4, Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20, 1 Timothy 5:4, Hebrews 12:9

Topics: "Obedience", "Parental Authority"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the biblical command for children to obey their parents, highlighting that this principle is universally recognized and rooted in both natural law and divine revelation. He explains that obedience is not only a duty but also brings blessings, as it is pleasing to God and is the first commandment with a promise. Wesley urges parents to instill this obedience from a young age, warning against the dangers of indulgence and the consequences of allowing children to act on their own will. He calls for a serious commitment from both parents and children to uphold this commandment, framing it as essential for spiritual well-being and familial harmony.

Transcript

~~ "Children, obey your parents in all thin~gs." Col. 3:20

1. It has been a subject of controversy for many years, whether there are any innate principles in the mind of man. But it is allowed on all hands, if there be any practical principles naturally Unplanted in the soul, that "we ought to honour our parents," will claim this character almost before any other. It is enumerated among those universal principles by the most ancient authors and is undoubtedly found even among savages in the most barbarous nations. We may trace it through all the extent of Europe and Asia, through the wilds of Africa, and the forests of America. And it is not less, but more observable in the most civilized nations. So it was first in the eastern parts of the world, which were for so many ages the seat of empire, of learning and politeness, as well as of religion. So it was afterwards in all the Grecian states, and throughout the whole Roman Empire. In this respect, it is plain, they that "have not the" written "law, are a law unto themselves," showing "the work," the substance, "of the law" to be "written in their hearts."

2. And wherever God has revealed his will to man, this law has been a part of that revelation. It has been herein opened afresh, considerably enlarged, and enforced in the strongest manner. In the Jewish revelation, the notorious breakers thereof were punishable with death. And this was one of the laws which our blessed Lord did not come to destroy, but to fulfil. Accordingly he severely reprov'd the Scribes and

Pharisees for making it void through their traditions; clearly showing that the obligation thereof extended to all ages. It is the substance of this which St. Paul delivers to the Ephesians: (Eph. 6:1:) "Children, obey your parents in the Lord;" and again in those words to the Colossians, "Children, obey your parents in all things." [Col. 3:20]

3. It is observable, that the Apostle enforces this duty by a threefold encouragement: First. To the Ephesians he adds, "For this is right:" It is an instance of justice as well as mercy. It is no more than their due: it is what we owe to them for the very being which we have received from them. Secondly. "This is acceptable to the Lord;" it is peculiarly pleasing to the great Father of men and angels that we should pay honour and obedience to the fathers of our flesh. Thirdly. It is "the first commandment with promise;~" the first to the performance whereof a peculiar promise is annexed: "that it may be well with thee, and that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." This promise has been generally understood to include health and temporal blessings, as well as long life. And we have seen innumerable proofs, that it belongs to the Christian as well as the Jewish dispensation: Many remarkable instances of its accomplishment occur even at this day.

But what is the meaning of these words, "Children, obey your parents in all things?" I will endeavour, by the assistance of God, First, to explain, and, Then to apply them.

I. 1. First. I will endeavour to explain these words; and the rather, because so few people seem to understand them. Look round into the world, not the heathen but the Christian world, nay, the Reformed part of it; look among those that have the Scriptures in their own tongue; and who is there that appears even to have heard of this? Here and there a child obeys the parent out of fear, or perhaps out of natural 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 that duly inculcate this duty upon their children? I doubt, a vast majority both of parents and children are totally ignorant of the whole affair. For the sake of these I will make it as plain as I can: But still I am thoroughly sensible, those that are not willing to be convinced will no more understand what I say than if I was talking Greek or Hebrew.

2. You will easily observe, that by parents the Apostle means ~both fathers and mothers, as he refers us to the Fifth Commandment~, which names both the one and the other. And, however human laws may vary herein, the law of God makes no difference; but lays us under the same obligation of obeying both ~the one and the other.

3. But before we consider how we are to obey our parents, it ma~y be inquired, how long we are to obey them. Are children to obey only till they run alone~, till they go to school, till they can read and write, or till they are as tall as their parents, or, attain to years of discretion? Nay, if they obey only [because they cannot help it, only] because they fear to be beaten, or because otherwise they cannot procure food and raiment, what avails such obedience? Those only who obey their parents when they can live without them, and when they neither hope nor fear anything from them, shall have praise from God.

4. "But is a man that is at age, or a woman that is married, under any farther obligation to obey their parents?" With regard to marriage, although it is true that a man is to leave father and mother, and cleave unto his wife; and, by parity of reason, she is to leave father and mother, and cleave unto her husband; (in consequence of which there may be some particular cases wherein conjugal duty must take [the] place" of filial;) yet I cannot learn, either from Scripture or reason, that marriage either cancels or lessens the general obligation of filial duty. Much less does it appear that it is either cancelled or lessened by our

having lived one-and-twenty years. I never understood it so in my own case. When I had lived upwards of thirty years, I looked upon myself to stand just in the same relation to my father as I did when I was ten years old. And when I was between forty and fifty, I judged myself full as much obliged to obey my mother in everything lawful, as I did when I was in my leading-strings [or hanging-sleeve coat].

5. But what is implied in, "Children, obey your parents in all things?" Certainly the First point of obedience is to do nothing which your father or mother forbids, whether it be great or small. Nothing is more plain than that the prohibition of a parent binds every conscientious child; that is, except the thing prohibited is clearly enjoined of God. Nor indeed is this all; the matter may be carried a little farther still: A tender parent may totally disapprove what he does not care flatly to forbid. What is the duty of a child in this case? How far is that disapprobation to be regarded? Whether it be equivalent to a prohibition or not, a person who would have a conscience void of offence should undoubtedly keep on the safe side, and avoid what may perhaps be evil. It is surely the more excellent way, to do nothing which you know your parents disapprove. To act otherwise seems to imply a degree of disobedience, which one of a tender conscience would wish to avoid.

6. The Second thing implied in this direction is, Do every thing which your father or mother bids, be it great or small, provided it be not contrary to any command of God. Herein God has given a power to parents, which even sovereign princes have not. The King of England, for instance, is a sovereign prince; yet he has not power to bid me do the least thing, unless the law of the land requires me so to do; for he has no power but to execute the law. The will of the king is no law to the subject. But the will of the parent is a law to the child, who is bound in conscience to submit thereto unless it be contrary to the law of God.

7. It is with admirable wisdom that the Father of spirits has given this direction, that as the strength of the parents supplies the want of strength, and the understanding of the parents the want of understanding, in their children, till they have strength and understanding of their own; so the will of the parents may [should] guide that of their children till they have wisdom and experience to guide themselves. This, therefore, is the very first thing which children have to learn, -- that they are to obey their parents, to submit to their will, in all things. And this they may be inured to, long before they understand the reason of it; and, indeed, long before they are capable of understanding any of the principles of religion. Accordingly, St. Paul directs all parents to bring up their children "in the discipline and doctrine of the Lord." For their will may be broken by proper discipline, even in their early infancy; whereas it must be a considerable time after, before they are capable of instruction. This, therefore, is the first point of all: Bow down their wills from the very first dawn of reason; and, by habituating them to submit to your will, prepare them for submitting to the will of their Father which is in heaven.

8. But how few children do we find, even of six or eight years old, that understand anything of this! Indeed, how should they understand it, seeing they have none to teach them? Are not their parents, father as well as mother, full as ignorant of the matter as themselves? Whom do you find, even among religious people, that have the least conception of it? Have not you seen the proof of it with your own eyes? Have not you been present when a father or mother has said, "My child, do so or so?" The child, without any ceremony, answered peremptorily, "I won't." And the parent quietly passes it by, without any further notice. And does he or she not see, that, by this cruel indulgence, they are training up their child, by flat rebellion against their parents, to rebellion against God? Consequently they are training him up for the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels! Did they duly consider this they would neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, till they had taught him a better lesson, and made him thoroughly afraid of ever giving that diabolical answer again.

9. Let me reason this case a little farther with you parents that fear God. If you do fear God, how dare you suffer a child above a year old to say, "I ~will do" what you forbid, or, "I ~won't do" what you bid, and to go unpunished? Why do not you stop him at once, that he may never dare to say so again? Have you no bowels, no compassion for your child? No regard for his salvation or destruction? Would you suffer him to curse or swear in your presence, and take no notice of it? Why, disobedience is as certain a way to damnation as cursing and swearing. Stop him, stop him at first, in the name of God. Do not "spare the rod, and spoil the child." If you have not the heart of a tiger, do not give up your child to his own will, that is, to the devil. Though it be pain to yourself, yet pluck your offspring out of the lion's teeth. Make them submit, that they may not perish. Break their will, that you may save their soul.

10. I cannot tell how to enforce this point sufficiently. To fix it upon your minds more strongly, permit me to add part of a letter on the subject, printed some years ago: --

"In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will. To inform their understanding is a work of time, and must proceed by slow degrees; but the subjecting the will is a thing which must be done at once; and the sooner the better. For by our neglecting timely correction they contract a stubbornness which is hardly ever to be conquered, and never without using that severity which would be as painful to us as to the children. Therefore, I call those cruel parents who pass for kind and indulgent; who permit their children to contract habits which they know must be afterwards broken.

"I insist upon conquering the wills of children betimes; because this is the only foundation for a religious education. When this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by the reason of its parent, till its own understanding comes to maturity.

"I cannot yet dismiss this subject. As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children, ensures their after-wretchedness and irreligion; and whatever checks and mortifies it, promotes their future happiness and piety. This is still more evident if we consider that religion is nothing else but the doing the will of God, and not our own; and that self-will being the grand impediment to our temporal and eternal happiness, no indulgence of it can be trivial; no denial of it unprofitable. Heaven or hell depends on this alone. So that the parent who studies to subdue it in his children, works together with God in the saving of a soul. The parent who indulges it does the devil's work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable; and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body, for ever!

"This, therefore, I cannot but earnestly repeat, -- break their wills betimes; begin this great work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, or perhaps speak at all. Whatever pains it cost, conquer their stubbornness: break the will, if ~you would not damn the child. I conjure you not to neglect, not to delay this! Therefore, (1.) Let a child, from a year old, be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly. In order to this, (2.) Let him have nothing he cries for; absolutely nothing, great or small; else you undo your own work. (3.) At all events, from that age, make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it. Let none persuade you it is cruelty to do this; it is cruelty not to do it. Break his will now, and his soul will live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity.

11. On the contrary, how dreadful are the consequences of that accursed kindness which gives children their own wills, and does not bow down their necks from their infancy! It is chiefly owing to this, that so many religious parents bring up children that have no religion at all; children that, when they are grown up, have no regard for them, perhaps set them at nought, and are ready to pick out their eyes! Why is this, but because their wills were not broken at first? -- because they were not inured from their early infancy to

obey their parents in all things, and to submit to their wills as to the will of God? -- because they were not taught from the very first dawn of reason, that the will of their parents was, to them, the will of God; that to resist it was rebellion against God, and an inlet to all ungodliness?

II. 1. This may suffice for the explication of the text: I proceed to the application of it. And permit me, First, to apply to you that are parents, and, as such concerned to teach your children. Do you know these things yourselves? Are you thoroughly convinced of these important truths? Have you laid them to heart? and have you put them in practice, with regard to your own children? Have you inured them to discipline, before they were capable of instruction? Have you broken their wills from their earliest infancy; and do you still continue so to do, in opposition both to nature and custom? Did you explain to them, as soon as their understanding began to open, the reasons of your proceeding thus? Did you point out to them the will of God as the sole law of every intelligent creature; and show them it is the will of God that they should obey you in all things? Do you inculcate this over and over again till they perfectly comprehend it? O never be weary of this labour of love! and your labour will not always be in vain.

2. At least, do not teach them to disobey, by rewarding them for disobedience. Remember! you do this every time you give them anything because they cry for it. And herein they are apt scholars: If you reward them for crying, they will certainly cry again. So that there is no end, unless you make it a sacred rule, to give them nothing which they cry for. And the shortest way to do this is, never suffer them to cry aloud. Train them up to obedience in this one instance, and you will easily bring them to obey in others. ~Why should you not begin to-day? Surely you see what is the most ~excellent way; best for your child, and best for your own soul. Why then do you disobey? Because you are a coward; because you ~want resolution. And doubtless it requires [no small resolution to ~begin and persist herein. It certainly requires] no small patience, ~more than nature ever gave. But the grace of God is sufficient for you; you can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth you. This grace is sufficient to give you diligence, as well as resolution; otherwise laziness will be as great a hindrance as cowardice. For without much pains you cannot conquer: Nothing can be done with a slack hand; labour on; never tire, lay line upon line, till patience has its perfect work.

3. But there is another hindrance that is full as hard to be conquered as either laziness or cowardice. It is called fondness, and is usually mistaken for love: But, O, how widely different from it! It is real hate; and hate of the most mischievous kind, tending to destroy both body and soul in hell! O give not way to it any longer, no, not for a moment. Fight against it with your might! for the love of God; for the love of your children; for the love of your own soul!

4. I have one word more to say to parents; to mothers in particular. If, in spite of all the Apostle can say, you encourage your children by your example to "adorn" themselves "with gold, or pearls, or costly apparel," you and they must drop into the pit together. But if they do it, though you set them a better example, still it is yours, as well as their fault; for if you did not put any ornament on your little child that you would not wear yourself, (which would be utter distraction, and far more inexcusable than putting it on your own arms or head), yet you did not inure them to obey you from their infancy, and teach them the duty of it, from at least two years old. Otherwise, they would not have dared to do anything, great or small, contrary to your will. Whenever, therefore, I see the fine-dressed daughter of a plain-dressed mother, I see at once the mother is defective either in knowledge or religion. Either she is ignorant of her own or her child's duty, or she has not practised what she knows.

5. I cannot dismiss this subject yet. I am pained continually at seeing religious parents suffer their children to run into the same folly of dress, as if they had no religion at all. In God's name, why do you suffer them to vary a hair's breadth from your example? "Why, they will do it?" They will! Whose fault is that? Why did not you break their will from their infancy? At least do it now; better late than never. It should have been done before they were two years old: It may be done at eight or ten, though with far more difficulty. However, do it now; and accept that difficulty as the just reward for your past neglect. Now, at least carry your point, whatever it costs. Be not mealy-mouthed; say not, like foolish Eli, "Nay, my children, it is no good report which I hear of you," instead of restraining them with a strong hand; but speak (though as calmly as possible, yet) firmly and peremptorily, "I will have it so;" and do as you say. Instil diligently into them the love of plain dress, and hatred of finery. Show them the reason of your own plainness of dress, and show it is equally reasonable for them. Bid defiance to indolence, to cowardice, to foolish fondness, and at all events carry your point; if you love their souls, make and keep them just as plain as yourselves. And I charge you, grandmothers before God, do not hinder your daughters herein. Do not dare to give the child anything which the mother denies. Never take the part of the children against their parent; never blame her before them. If you do not strengthen her authority, as you ought to do, at least do not weaken it; but if you have either sense or piety left, help her on in the work of real kindness

6. Permit me now to apply myself to you, children; particularly you that are the children of religious parents. Indeed if you have no fear of God before your eyes, "I have no concern with you at present; but if you have, if you really fear God, and have a desire to please him, you desire to understand all his commandments, the fifth in particular. Did you ever understand it yet? Do you now understand what is your duty to your father and mother? Do you know, at least do you consider, that by the divine appointment their will is law to you?+ Have you ever considered the extent of that obedience to your parents which God requires? "Children, obey your parents in all things." No exception, but of things unlawful. Have you practised your duty in this extent? Did you ever so much as intend it?

7. Deal faithfully with your own souls. Is your conscience now clear in this matter? Do you do nothing which you know to be contrary to the will either of your father or mother? Do you never do anything (though ever so much inclined to it) which he or she forbids? Do you abstain from everything which they dislike, as far as you can in conscience? On the other hand, are you careful to do whatever a parent bids? Do you study and contrive how to please them, to make their lives as easy and pleasant as you can? Whoever you are that add this to your general care to please God in all things, blessed art thou of the Lord! "Thy days shall be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."

8. But as for you who are little concerned about this matter, who do not make it a point of conscience to obey your parents in all things, but sometimes obey them, as it happens, and sometimes not; who frequently do what they forbid or disapprove, and neglect what they bid you do; suppose you awake out of sleep, that you begin to feel yourself a sinner, and begin to cry to God for mercy, is it any wonder that you find no answer, while you are under the ~guilt of unrepented sin? How can you expect mercy from God till you obey your parents? But suppose you have, by an uncommon miracle of mercy, tasted of the pardoning love of God, can it be expected, although you hunger and thirst after righteousness, after the perfect love of God, that you should ever attain it, ever be satisfied therewith, while you live in outward sin, in the wilful transgression of a known law of God, in disobedience to your parents? Is it not rather a wonder, that he has not withdrawn his Holy Spirit from you? that he still continues to strive with you, though you continually grieve his Spirit? O grieve him no more! By the grace of God, obey them in all things from this moment! As soon as you come home, as soon as you set foot within the door, begin an

entirely new course! Look upon your father and mother with new eyes; see them as representing your Father which is in heaven: Endeavour, study, rejoice to please, to help, to obey them in all things: Behave not barely as their child, but as their servant for Christ's sake. O how will you then love one another! In a manner unknown before. God will bless you to them, and them to you: All around will feel that God is with you of a truth. Many shall see it and praise God; and the fruit of it will remain when both you and they are lodged in Abraham's bosom.

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