

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 13, 2020**

WHATEVER YOU DO (8)

Colossians 3:18-4:1

I want to tell you a quick story that doesn't exactly fit with today's message. But I think it is too good to pass up. With his Mom listening, a 9-year-old boy was reciting the bicycle safety rules he had to memorize for a scouting merit badge. Some of you can probably identify, because you're a scout, or you've been a scout, or you have a scout in your family.

He went through the list of rules he had learned: "Obey all traffic rules. Ride with traffic, not against it. Use hand signals for turning or stopping." He got his mother's full attention when he said: "All Presbyterians have the right of way." (Ba-da-bing!) *Some* Presbyterians think they (we) always have the right of way! I don't think that verse is in the Bible.

Today's message is part 8 of a series of sermons under the general theme of *Whatever You Do*, a phrase used twice by Paul in Colossians 3, first in verse 17 and again in verse 23. It won't hurt us to hear these verses again.

Verse 17: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

Verse 23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men ..." Continuing in verse 24, Paul says: "... (S)ince you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

In *The Message* paraphrase, verse 17 says: "Let every detail in your lives – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

And verses 23 and 24: "Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ."

Whatever you do, in every detail in your life, never forget that the ultimate Master you're serving is Jesus. This includes all the relationships in your life. Last Sunday we talked about wives and husbands in the relationship of marriage. Today we'll focus on the relationship between children and parents.

It is interesting that Paul speaks first to children. You'd think he would address parents first, since they are in the position of authority over their children. Parents are the ones primarily responsible for the well-being, nurture, training, discipline, and instruction of their children. Parents are to protect and provide for their children, and to train them up in the way they should go (Proverbs 22:6). Given how large their God-given role is, I would expect Paul to

speak to parents before addressing children. But Paul doesn't do what I would expect. He speaks to children first.

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (3:20). In *everything*? Is Paul serious? Does he really mean *everything*? If your parents ask you (or *tell* you) to do something immoral or unethical, something against the law – like stealing from someone or deliberately telling a lie – are you supposed to obey them? Or suppose they tell you to do something dangerous or foolish – like running out into the street without checking to see if it is safe or jumping off the roof of the church building (unless it is on fire)? Are you supposed to obey them in *everything*? Are you supposed to obey them when they tell you to do something you know is wrong in the eyes of God? If obeying your parents means disobeying God, does God really want you to do what your parents tell you?

Paul clarifies this for us in Ephesians 6:1 – a verse that parallels Colossians 3:20. In Ephesians 6:1 he says: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Obey your parents *in the Lord* – which is to say, when what your parents tell you to do or not to do agrees with what God says. The *in everything* of Colossians 3:20 equals the *in the Lord* of Ephesians 6:1. It means you are to obey your parents in anything and everything that agrees with how the Bible says children are to treat their parents. It does not mean that children of any age have a duty to obey Mom and Dad if to obey them means disobeying God.

But Paul, in both Colossians and Ephesians, is writing to Christians – to Christian wives and husbands, Christian parents and their children, Christian masters and servants (employers and employees). He is writing to believers who, because of God's grace, have been rescued from sin and guilt and hell, and have been joined together in the new community of God's people, in which they – *we* – are to “submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

The command to children to “obey your parents” is not absolute. But it is serious. The Bible does not say: “Children, obey your parents, if (or when) you feel like it.” It does not say: “Obey your parents when it is convenient.” It does not say: “Obey your parents just to get something from them,” even though you may receive a reward for your obedience. It does not say: “Obey your parents when they are watching you.” It says: “Obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1) and it “pleases the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).

Two teenagers were talking. One said to his friend: “You know, I'm really worried about my parents. My Mom makes all these fantastic meals for us. You wouldn't believe all the things she does to make life good for us. Then, there's my dad. He gets dressed up every day to go to work – at least he used to, before the pandemic. Now he works at home, but he has all these meetings and often has to work into the evening, in order to provide for us and to make sure I'll be able to go to college.”

“What are you worried about?” his friend said. “Sounds like you've got it made.”

“I know,” he said. “I'm just afraid that they'll try to escape!”

Like this teenager, lots of kids have it really, really good. Unlike this teenager, most kids don't realize how good they have it. The grass always looks greener somewhere else. Most kids tend to think someone else's parents are cooler, or smarter, or more easy-going, or less strict in their rules. They wish their parents didn't have so many rules. Or so many expectations, like chores to do around the house. All of us – not just our kids, but all of us – have a natural, in-born desire to be free to make our own rules to live by. We want to be free to do what makes us happy, without giving anyone else a thought. We want to be in charge of our lives. We don't want to be subject to the authority of anyone else, even (or sometimes, especially) our parents.

Who hasn't felt that way? We all have. But God has placed children under the authority of parents for a reason that should be intuitively obvious. When we are children – before we have grown up to adulthood – we are in need of protection, instruction, correction, and direction. Obeying our parents is one way we grow up to become adults.

In Ephesians 6:2-3, Paul reminds us of the commandment given to children in the Ten Commandments. It is #5 on the list: "Honor your father and mother ... that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (cf. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). We shouldn't take the promise contained in this commandment as a guarantee. Not everyone who honors their parents is rewarded with a long and prosperous life. Some do die young. Some do experience great difficulty in life. It is not a guarantee. It is more like a biblical proverb that tells the likelihood of an outcome, but not a guarantee in every case.

For example, Proverbs 22:6 says: "Train up a child in the way he (she) should go, and when he (she) is old he (she) will not turn from it." In *The Message* it says: "Point your kids in the right direction. When they're old they won't be lost." This is not an absolute promise to parents that if you do your job well, your kids will all become followers of Jesus and live for Him. It doesn't work that way. There is no guarantee that the children of believing parents will be believers, no matter how loving and faithful their parents are. In any given family, some children may follow Jesus and others may not. A child's rejection of Jesus and the Christian faith does *not* mean that the parents have failed in their God-given mission.

We could talk more about that another time. But I want to go back to the commandment to honor our parents. Like the rest of the Ten Commandments, this is a commandment you never outgrow. Obedience to your parents when you are young is one way to honor them. But the time comes when children are no longer under the authority of their parents. The time comes when you no longer have to obey your parents. While you are a child, until you become an adult and are no longer dependent (financially) on your parents, you are to obey your parents in the Lord. The time comes when you no longer have to obey their rules.

But you will never outgrow the God-given mandate to honor your father and your mother. Never. No matter how old you are. Whether your parents are living or deceased. Adult children are not subject to the commandment to "obey your parents." Parents of adult children should never expect it, or pressure their adult children to do what the parents want.

Some of you may have parents, or may have had parents, you find it very difficult to honor ... because of the way they have treated you, because of their failures as parents. Maybe you were mistreated by one or both of your parents. Maybe you felt abandoned or unloved. Maybe you felt (or feel) like you could never measure up to their expectations. Maybe you felt (or feel) like they never tried to understand you. Maybe they were too strict. Maybe they weren't strict enough. Maybe they neglected your moral and spiritual training.

How do you honor your father and mother when you feel like they failed you? This is a really hard one. What you have to do, I think, is to ask the Lord to help you to do what seems almost impossible. Because it is not impossible with God. Everything, including showing honor to a parent who is not deserving of honor, is *Him-possible* with God. Not *impossible* but *Him-possible*.

You've probably heard this before. If you cannot honor the person, you can still honor the office the person holds. If you had a lousy Mom or Dad, you can still honor them because of their position, even though they did a miserable job. You can respect the position, even if you can't respect the person in the office.

There is one other thing you can do if you have trouble honoring your father or mother. You can forgive them. You can forgive your Dad. You can forgive your Mom. You can choose to extend the grace of forgiveness to them. You can forgive them for whatever they did to you, or failed to do for you, just as God in Christ has forgiven you all your sins. You can take the step of forgiving them, even if they are no longer in your life. Or no longer living. As long as you're alive, it is not too late, and it is never too soon, to forgive your parents.

The general rule for children is:

“Children, obey your parents in everything” – do what your parents tell you (*MSG*) – “for this pleases the Lord”(Colossians 3:20).

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord” – do what your parents tell you (*MSG*) – “for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1).

Children, to obey your parents when you are young and under their authority is the right thing to do and it pleases the Lord. If you find yourself in a situation in which one of your parents (or both) asks or tells or pressures you to do or say something you know is wrong, find a trusted adult you can talk to about it. A trusted *Christian* adult. I hope you will never be in that kind of situation.

It won't surprise you – at least it shouldn't – that the best example of a child's relationship to his parents in the Bible is Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell us much about Jesus' childhood, only one story, really, that took place between His birth and infancy, on the one hand, and the start of His public ministry when He was around 30 years old, on the other. Here is the story, from Luke 2:41-51:

Every year Jesus' parents [Joseph and Mary] traveled to Jerusalem [from Nazareth where they lived] for the Passover. When He was 12 years old, they went up [to Jerusalem] as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but His parents didn't know it. Thinking He was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began to look for Him among relative and neighbors. When they didn't find Him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for Him.

The next day they found Him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with Him, impressed with the sharpness of His answers. But His parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said: "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

Jesus said: "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they didn't understand what He was talking about. So He went back to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.

From this we see two things. We see, first, that not even Mary and Joseph were perfect parents. If they were, they would never have left Jerusalem without making sure Jesus was with them.

The second thing we see is that the Bible tells us that even Jesus, the Son of God from all eternity, lived in obedience to Mary and Joseph, his mother and the father who raised Him, during the years of His childhood here on earth. If you don't think obedience to your parents is a big deal, just think about Jesus.

The relationship between children and parents is a 2-way street, just like the relationship between wives and husbands. Next Sunday, we'll look at what Paul says about the role and responsibility of parents to their children.

Here is the final thought for today: Since Jesus lived in obedience to His parents when He was young, we should, too. Because Jesus honored His father and mother, we should, too. Because it is right. Because it pleases the Lord. Because we want to be like Jesus.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.