

God's Word to Young People

Scripture: Ephesians 6:1–3; 2 Timothy 3:1–5

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Take a moment to walk with the average young person to see what he might encounter during a typical day. As he visits his Internet homepage, his eyes are assaulted with images of half-dressed celebrities, parading the sin of an independent, immoral lifestyle. The DJ from the local radio station accompanies him on the way to school. It's usually someone with a crass sense of humor, filling his mind with contemporary lyrics that promote the way of folly. Along the road, he's exposed to billboards and advertising designed to arouse lust and create discontentment. Any time he spends with the world's entertainment portrays a very realistic form of make-believe. The typical television programs and movies glorify the mysterious and exhilarating life of the rebel—he's defiant and witty, violent and sexual, rich and playful . . . and utterly godless (but never mind the consequences).

Get the picture? Before many teenagers arrive at school, their minds are already pondering the messages of all the images they've seen and the voices they've heard. And that's before eight or more hours of teachers and peer influence. It's a daily exercise in mind pollution.

It's no secret that our age in particular has turned defiance into a virtue and made obedience something to be mocked. This warped and rebellious worldview comes through in every aspect of popular culture. Entertainment, music, and even newscasts glorify revolt and rebellion against every form of authority. Statistics show that the average child living at home in America watches at least twenty-eight hours of television each week. (For some kids, the total is much higher.) Programming that targets young people is often the very *worst* at deliberately glamorizing sin. By the time most teenagers graduate from high school, they've been overexposed to the grossest kinds of evil through "entertainment" media in mind-numbing ways—so that nothing seems particularly appalling anymore.

What's the predictable result? Drug abuse, violent crime, sexual promiscuity, and other forms of lawlessness are at epidemic levels among teenagers. Large, disturbing subcultures exist among young people who practice bizarre forms of body modification (such as tattooing and piercing), immerse themselves in occultism, or openly practice other forms of antisocial behavior. Sin and rebellion have taken society captive, and their tragic effects are most vividly apparent in the culture of our young people.

Yet millions in society—especially among those in control of the entertainment media—glory in the evil. The apostle Paul prophetically foretold times like these. He wrote to Timothy:

Know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, *disobedient to parents*, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! (2 Timothy 3:1-5, italics added)

It's fitting that rebellion against parents is at the heart of that list of evils, because virtually all the

other sins listed (especially self-love, thanklessness, a lack of self-control, headstrong haughtiness, and hedonism) are inevitable fruits of youthful rebellion against parents. A culture of rebellion breeds every other kind of sin as well.

And that is why we are living in an age of moral anarchy. That is the culture in which our children are growing up. Although the wise parent will minimize a child's exposure to the evils in the world, there's simply no way to isolate or insulate our children completely from all those corrupting influences—suggestive images and compelling voices. But even if we could raise them in a protective bubble, that wouldn't solve the problem. Our children are fallen creatures, naturally drawn to evil.

So as you can see, it's a perilous walk for the typical teenager as he travels through his fallen world. Like the sirens of Homer's *Odyssey*, beautiful voices entice him to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin—"Resist authority. Taste forbidden pleasures. Take control of your own life." But one voice stands apart, contradicting all the rest with stunning boldness. God commands young people to a simple, yet profoundly wise way of life: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is *right*."

Even though that command comes at the beginning of a new chapter in Ephesians, it's a continuation of the same subject Paul had been discussing. He was moving systematically through the family, describing each family member's duty, and showing what mutual submission means in the context of the family structure.

Children, of course, are to show submission by obeying their parents. This is one of only a handful of texts in Scripture that directly address children in particular (see also Exodus 20:12; Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20; Colossians 3:20). Virtually every time the Word of God speaks to children, the message is the same, aptly summarized by Ephesians 6:1-3: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'"

In verse 2, Paul was quoting the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you." That commandment is the turning point of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments describe aspects of our duty to God: have no other gods; make no graven images; don't take the Lord's name in vain; and remember the Sabbath. The remaining six commandments spell out our duties with respect to other people: honor your parents; do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; and do not covet.

The starting point, the foundation for all earthly relationships, is the child's duty to honor his or her parents. Since that is the first relationship we ever experience, it's the first moral principle every child needs to learn. It's fitting, therefore, that the leading commandment in the Second Table of the Law governs the parent-child relationship.

As the Apostle Paul pointed out, the fifth commandment is also "the first commandment with a promise." In fact, this is the only one of the Ten Commandments that comes with a promise. Two other commandments (the second and the third) are accompanied by threats. The fourth commandment is followed by an extensive explanation of the reason for the commandment. But "honor your father and your mother" is the only commandment with a benediction for those who keep

it.

It's a promise of long life, blessing, and prosperity. Writing under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, Paul brought together the promise of Exodus 20:12 ("that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you") with the fuller language of Deuteronomy 4:40: "that it may go well with you . . . and that you may prolong your days [on the earth]"—so that there are two parts to the promise. On the one hand, it promises *quality of life* (that it may be well with you). On the other hand, it promises *length of days* (and you may live long).

The "promise" was a divine pledge to the Israelites as a *nation*. As far as individuals are concerned, this is really more of a maxim than an ironclad surety. In other words, it is a truism, not a guarantee. Some people honor their parents and die young anyway. There have undoubtedly been cases where people who have despised their parents' authority have nevertheless lived to old age. But as a general rule, the principle is true. Rebelling against parents has built-in consequences that tend to shorten one's life.

The apostle Paul's instructions to children in Ephesians 6 are notable for their straightforward simplicity. There's no long list of duties, no complex set of instructions—just one simple command: "Obey your parents." Of course, all *other* duties—such as love for God, love for brothers and sisters, love for neighbors, and all other important moral precepts—will be covered by this rule if the parents simply do what they are commanded in verse 4: "Bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." Children who learn how to obey their parents will thereby also learn to obey God. This highlights once again the supreme importance of a Christian family.

In a future post, we'll get a little more specific about children obeying their parents. For now, here are a few questions to discuss in the comment thread:

1. Can any of you attest to the consequences—either good or bad—of how you obeyed (or disobeyed) your parents? How have you found God's Word to speak the truth in this matter?
2. Children growing up today face a very different world than their parents experienced. Children, what influences and pressures do you face from the culture that you find difficult to resist?
3. Parents, how can you minimize the influence of the culture on your children, and maximize the influence of God's Word?

Tackle one or all, but join in the discussion. Your comments are often helpful to others who are struggling through the same things you face as a parent.

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