

“Generation to Generation”

Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4 ¹

Now well into his forties, Ron Mehl had never met his father. Ron’s dad left his mother while Ron was a baby, and she had never mentioned his name to Ron—ever—in all the years since. Ron grew up with the pain and the emptiness of a dad who wasn’t there for his little boy. Ron’s dad wasn’t there to play catch. He wasn’t there for ball games or school activities. He wasn’t there to encourage or comfort.

Now, decades later, after an exhaustive and exhausting search, Ron stood nervously at the door of a small apartment thousands of miles from his home and looked into the face of a man he had never seen before. Not in a photograph. Not even in his imagination. And yet he felt as though he were looking into a mirror.

Ron’s dad invited him and his wife, Joyce, into the tiny apartment. They embraced gingerly. They made awkward attempts at small talk. They wept a little. As they began to speak of the past, Ron’s dad was careful to take the blame for what had happened to their family. Quietly, he remembered going away to war, and that, when he came back, things just weren’t the same. He didn’t elaborate, but, looking into his son’s eyes, he slowly said, “I know that you can never forgive me.”

Ron replied, also slowly, “Dad, I don’t know everything about the past, and I don’t want to. But I do forgive you.”

“When I said those words,” Ron remembers, “tears came to his eyes. I could almost hear the sounds of a key being turned in a lock and a prison door swinging open. I remembered the Lord’s words, *the Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted and to proclaim liberty to the captives* (Luke 4:18). I could see in his eyes that he experienced release in that moment. And in a strange way, I did, too. Six months later, he was dead.”²

We come today to the Fifth Commandment, which marks the shift from those Commandments relating specifically to our relationship with God to those Commandments that have to do with our relationships with each other. And it is telling that the first of these “each other” Commandments has to do with our relationship with our parents:

*Honor your father and your mother,
so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you
(Exodus 20:12).*

I suspect that some of us are becoming uncomfortable at this point. You may be thinking to yourself, “This command doesn’t apply to me, because I don’t have the kind of parents who should be honored. I don’t want to honor them, and I don’t intend to. There’s no way God could expect these words to apply to me.”

Ron Mehl wrote, “I, too, know about such feelings. God understands the depth of our pain, and God takes our pain very, very seriously. But God didn’t list any exceptions here. There are no exemptions and no special considerations. The Commandment applies to all of us,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 19, 2015.

² Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father’s Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), pp. 127, 146.

whether we had good, godly, loving parents, or whether we didn't. And to make sure we didn't miss the point, God repeated the Commandment in the New Testament" (Ephesians 6:2-3).³

The truth of the matter is that, however challenging this Commandment may be for us, it is absolutely crucial to a meaningful and an abundant life. How we respond to this Commandment affects everything about our lives. It prevents our lives from being taken captive by bitterness, and it prevents our poisoning the future with the poison of the past. Our response to this Commandment determines in large part how God will work through our lives . . . and whether God will work through our lives at all.⁴

The Fifth Commandment is the only one with a promise attached, and it makes clear once again the divine love that underlies these Commands. God wants us to be free to be blessed, and free to be a blessing. So how do we obey this commandment? I think there are two ways: (1) by God's grace, **we forgive our parents**; and (2) by God's grace, **we show love to them**. Let's think about these two things for a while.

Whether they were present or absent in our lives, I don't think we can ever overstate our parents' influence on who we are. "Sometimes it seems like our whole lives are nothing but a long series of decisions taken in their light, either imitating their teachings and examples, or consciously rejecting them. For every hug received, every pearl of wisdom imparted, every struggle undertaken on our behalf, every hour spent in their company, there is a reprimand resented, a falsehood, a betrayal, a bad decision, an abandonment, an act of violence – and all of these are stored in our souls, burning in us, acting within us, and replicated in our behavior toward others."⁵

For those of us who have suffered parental absence or abuse, we may be today where Jenny was in the movie, *Forrest Gump*. Having been abused as a child and a youth, she later went with Forrest to visit the derelict house where these things had occurred. As her rage boiled up, Jenny began throwing rocks at the house, and she continued throwing until she collapsed in exhausted tears of fury. As Forrest sat beside her, searching for words, he finally said, "Sometimes I guess there's just not enough rocks."⁶

Forrest made a powerful point, but let's consider what happens when we don't forgive. **Unwillingness to forgive probably constitutes the foremost contribution you and I ever make to the kingdom of darkness.** Indeed, unwillingness to forgive is probably the gateway to most of the ground that Satan holds in any of our lives.

Paul warned us not to "*let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold*" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Paul's warning means that when we allow unresolved anger to continue and accumulate in our spirits, we give Satan a beachhead he cannot get in any other way. And once that beachhead is established, Satan brings in his troops, his helicopters, and his heavy artillery. He digs in and fortifies his position, because he knows very well that bitterness and unforgiveness make our lives unblessed and unbleisable. He knows that bitterness and unforgiveness make us far more useful to his cause than would be the case if he simply killed us, because we continue to spread our poison into every life connected to our own.⁷

³ Mehl, p. 132.

⁴ Mehl, pp. 128-129.

⁵ David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 122.

⁶ *Forrest Gump*, Paramount Pictures, 1994, directed by Robert Zemeckis and starring Tom Hanks, Robin Wright, Gary Sinise, and Sally Field.

⁷ Mehl, pp. 145-146.

Let's consider this problem from the perspective of Jesus. While as far as we know, Jesus' earthly parents were loving parents, the Bible does tell us that He was "*tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin*" (Hebrews 4:15). The fact of the matter is that Jesus knew what it meant to be ill-treated, abused, and falsely accused. He knew what it meant to have kind words thrown back in His face. He knew how it felt to be betrayed and abandoned by someone close to Him. He knew what it was to be so misunderstood by His own family that at one point they tried to have Him committed. Yet He still loved. He forgave. He even gave His life for them.

As Jesus illustrates beyond all others, when it comes to forgiveness, the innocent party almost always pays. The one who forgives, the one who has been offended, is usually the one who must pay the price . . . but it is a price worth paying. I think it's probably impossible to imagine beforehand how much it pays to forgive. To forgive is to experience Light out of darkness. To forgive is to experience Life out of death.

My friend, no matter what has happened to you in the past, God is able to give you the ability to forgive. And a son or daughter who forgives a parent from the heart can be a different kind of parent to his or her own children. A parent free from bitterness is a parent who our Heavenly Father can bless and use in unimaginable ways.⁸ (Mehl, 133).

Let me say again that such forgiveness is not easy. Jesus showed us that forgiveness is unbelievably costly. But I'm here to tell you that **one of the most important—and one of the most difficult—decisions any of us ever makes is the decision to quit blaming our parents for the things we don't like about our lives and to take responsibility for what we do from here on with what we've got.** And God can help us do that.

In the end, even though the price may be steep, the one who forgives will know and experience the mighty blessing of God in his or her life. How much is that worth to you? How would you calculate the value of that?

My friends, there is really no way to honor your parents without forgiving them. Your parents may have been wonderful. They may have been awful. They may have been absent. But I suspect that some measure of parental forgiveness is necessary for every one of us. And when you broach the subject, your parents may be receptive or they may be rejecting once again. Whatever the case, forgiveness is powerful. It will change their lives, and it will change yours.⁹

If your parents are still living on This Side, I encourage you to find them, go to them, and move ahead with whatever dimensions of forgiveness remain unfinished. And if your parents are already on the Other Side, you can still write a letter to them and read it to them at their grave or in some other way. God will help you know what approach will bring the most healing.

Now let's think for a moment or two about what it might look like to love our parents once we've begun the process of forgiving them. I'd like to talk about this in the context of the idea of "blessing," which has to do with hope and the future.

Gary Smalley and John Trent have suggested that parents communicate blessing to their children in five ways, and it seems to me that these five ways work in the other direction—toward parents—too. These five ways are: (1) attributing high value to the person being blessed; (2) speaking that value and blessing aloud; (3) expressing that blessing through meaningful and

⁸ Mehl, p. 133.

⁹ Mehl, pp. 145-146.

appropriate touch; (4) imagining a special future for the one being blessed; and (5) committing oneself to help that future come into being.¹⁰ Let's look at each just for a moment.

High Value. Our parents are not just authority figures from our formative years. They are also living human beings with sensitivities and sins just like anyone else. The journey of honoring our parents begins with the awareness and the conviction that they, too, are created in the image of God. It was for them, too, that Jesus died. And it is for them, too, that Jesus intends “abundant life” (John 10:10).

Spoken Blessing. I told you recently about the child who said, “If you love someone, you should tell them a lot. People forget.” If “I love you” are words you can speak from your heart, find ways to speak them to your parents . . . often. Write them in cards and emails. Say them in person and in phone calls. If these words still choke in your throat, begin by asking God to continue the work of healing in your own spirit so that the words—and what they represent—can be born in you.

Meaningful Touch. Sometimes our parents, too, have a hard time saying “I love you”; and sometimes they, for their own reasons, and out of their own pain, have a hard time expressing love through meaningful touch. Here's a story of that sort.

When we lived in Louisville, Michael Reagan was one of the opinion writers for our local paper. As you may know, Michael is the adopted son of the late President, Ronald Reagan. Michael was adopted at birth by Reagan and his first wife, Jane Wyman. Unfortunately, the Reagans divorced shortly after Michael's adoption, and Michael was sent to a boarding school at age five, where he remained until he graduated at nineteen. As a result of a number of events in his life, Michael believed that God hated him.

The turning point in Michael's life came when he met his wife, Colleen, in 1973. Together they discovered the saving message of Jesus Christ, and for the first time, Michael was able to release the shame he had carried throughout his life.

But even as an adult, it continued to trouble Michael that his father had never hugged him or told him that he loved him. “Then one day,” he said, “I was praying, and it was almost as though God was sitting there with me, asking me when was the last time I told my dad I loved him or had given him a hug. I realized it was a two-way street.” After Michael told his father that he loved him, then he heard for the first time from his father's lips that he, too, was loved.

After being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Michael's dad sometimes didn't recognize him or know his name, but he always gave Michael a hug when he arrived or left. Once, Michael had forgotten to give his dad their usual good-bye hug. As Michael walked down the driveway with his daughter, she told him to turn around and look at Grandpa. When Michael turned around, he saw his father, standing in the driveway with his arms open waiting for that hug.¹¹

Special Future. As God brings healing to our own hearts, we begin to be able to see our parents more and more as God sees them. We begin to imagine what could happen as they themselves become open to God's work in their lives. And we begin to realize that God's possibilities in their lives are far greater than we have yet imagined.

Commitment. And as these changes begin to take place, God enables us to take more responsibility for our parents' well-being, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. We become able to provide for them some of the things they provided for us—or didn't—long ago.

¹⁰Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 24.

¹¹ www.lcu.edu, www.theaven.com, www.chronicallybiased.com

My friends, I'm here to tell you that most of the tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone. Rick Warren often says that "The best use of life is LOVE. The best expression of love is TIME. And the best time to love is NOW." Our lives are but a vapor, and we are wise to redeem the days while we still can.

In the end, maybe it all comes down to this: how much do you want God to work in and through your life? How available do you really want to be when the Holy Spirit looks for someone through whom to bring redemption in this generation? The work of honoring your parents is an essential step toward that goal. The journey sometimes involves difficult, painful work; but the pain will pass away. *God's blessing is forever.*¹²

¹² Mehl, p. 147.