Seven Debts We Owe Our Parents


In this series, we have studied about the home in general. We have discussed the husband/wife relationship. We have talked about the parent/child relationship, emphasizing the parents’ responsibility. In this final lesson, I want to deal with the responsibilities of the child. Let us look at “Seven Debts We Owe Our Parents.”

Some would say that they owe their parents nothing. In a movie some years ago, a father insisted that he had some respect coming. His grown son responded that he owed his father nothing. He said that he had not asked to come into the world and, since his father was responsible for his being here, the father owed him everything.

The biblical perspective is not that one-sided. While it does emphasize that parents owe their children much—because they are responsible for their being in this world—it also emphasizes that children owe something to their parents. If it were not for the parents, the child would not be alive. The gift of life is a special gift.

Thus Ephesians 6:1–4 challenges both parents and children:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Some parents live as though only their children have responsibilities. Some children live as though only their parents have responsibilities. Neither attitude is right. We have already seen how parents have the responsibility to care for and train their children. In return, what do we owe our parents?

OUR APPRECIATION

When Paul spoke of people turning away from God, he included this indication of how ungodly they had become: “They did not . . . give thanks” (Romans 1:21).

If we should be thankful to anyone, we should be thankful to our parents. I have already mentioned that they gave us the gift of life. They have also loved us and cared for us.

Bergen Evans once addressed the graduating class at Penn State University. He realized that he was talking to young people who did not appreciate what the previous generation had accomplished—young people who blamed their

1 Sometimes I present this lesson as “Seven Things We Owe Dad” or “Seven Things We Owe Mom.”

2 The primary emphasis in this presentation is on children still living at home, who are under the authority of their parents. In the final section of the lesson, however, general application is made to “children” of every age.

3 I realize that some parents do not love their children and care for them, but these are exceptions to the rule. Most, if not all, of your listeners have (or had) parents who did the best they could.
parents for the ills in the world. In his speech, he pointed out that their parents’ generation had increased life expectancy, had cut the average workday while increasing the per capita output, and had given them a healthier world than they had found. He spoke of the sacrifices made by their parents’ generation and the generation before, and how those generations had determined that life should be better for their children.

He told his listeners, “Because they gave you the best, you are the tallest, healthiest, brightest, and probably the best-looking generation to inhabit the land.” He reminded them that, because of their parents’ efforts, “You will work fewer hours, learn more, have more leisure time, travel to more distant places, and have more of a chance to follow your life’s ambition.”

He concluded with this thought: “If your generation can make as much progress as these two generations have, you should be able to solve a good many of the earth’s remaining ills.... But it won’t be easy. And you won’t do it by negative thinking, nor by tearing down or belittling. You can do it by hard work, humility, and faith in mankind.”

Our parents did not introduce us into a perfect world. After all, this world is tainted by sin (Genesis 3:17, 18). Taken as a whole, however, the earth is not a bad place to live while we prepare for eternity. The generations preceding us deserve a little credit.

According to psychologists, one of the basic needs of men is the need to feel they have value, the need to be appreciated. The Bible does not disagree with that conclusion. Do you appreciate your parents? Do you appreciate all they have done for you? Do you tell them that you appreciate them?

4When this lesson is used outside the U.S., different illustrations can be used to relate to the listeners. For instance, you can probably give several illustrations of how parents where you are teaching have left their children a better world than that into which they were born.

5Quoted by Batsell Barrett Baxter, Christ and Your Home (Abilene, Tex.: Herald of Truth, 1974), 35–36.

6The greatest proof that each of us has value is the fact that God loves us and gave His Son for us. In other words, we have value whether or not any other human ever expresses appreciation for us. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that we should express our appreciation one to another. (See, for instance, Ephesians 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12.)

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OUR RESPECT

We owe our parents our respect—not because they are always right, but simply because they are our parents. That basic truth was emphasized long ago in the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12). The word “honor” encompasses respect and all that goes with it. When the commandment was repeated in Leviticus 19:3, it read, “Every one of you shall reverence his mother and his father.” (Emphasis mine.)

The commandment included this amazing benefit for obedient children: “that your days may be prolonged.” Their days would be “prolonged” because they would not be killed for disobedience (as we will see in a moment). Their days would also be prolonged because they would learn good habits that would increase their span of life. Most important, their days would be prolonged because they were obeying God, and God would bless them.

The basic instruction to children to respect their parents was repeated and expanded in Deuteronomy 5:16:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

On that occasion, Moses emphasized that this was a direct command from God. The attendant blessing was also expanded. The general promise was “that it may go well with you.” Life will “go well” for the child who learns respect in the home: He or she will be a better student, a better mate, a better parent, and a better employee or employer.

In Deuteronomy 27, when Moses gave instructions for the renewing of the covenant as the Israelites entered the Promised Land, this same command was included—but in negative form: “Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother” (v. 16a).

7The KJV has “fear.” As we have indicated several times in this series, the word “fear” in this context indicates “deep respect, reverence.”

8The KJV has “setteth light by”—in other words, “treats in a light (disrespectful) fashion.”
In the New Testament, when the rich young ruler came to Jesus, asking what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus repeated several of the Ten Commandments, including, “Honor your father and mother” (Luke 18:20). The young man was able to say, “All these things I have kept from my youth” (v. 21).

Respect for parents is such a basic need that the command is repeated word for word as part of Jesus’ New Testament: “Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth” (Ephesians 6:2, 3).

How can we show respect to our parents?

1. We show respect (or a lack of respect) in the way we speak to our parents. In Isaiah 45:10 we find this odd verse: “Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ Or to a woman, ‘To what are you giving birth?’” The KJV has, “Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begettest thou?” (Emphasis mine.) The Living Bible paraphrases it this way: “Woe to the baby just being born who squalls to his father and mother, ‘Why have you produced me? Can’t you do anything right at all?’” In context, the writer was speaking of man’s attitude toward his Creator, but this graphically depicts the disrespectful young person who blames his parents for everything.

2. We also show respect (or a lack of respect) in the way we talk about our parents. When Ham mocked his father’s pitiable condition,9 he was cursed (Genesis 9:20–25).

3. We even show respect (or a lack of respect) in how we act; words are unnecessary for one to be disrespectful. Proverbs 30:17 speaks of “the eye that mocks a father, and scorns a mother,” saying that “the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.” When I read that, I can see a teen-ager protesting after he is reprimanded, “What did I say?”—and the parent answering, “It’s not what you said. It’s the way you rolled your eyes.”

In the Old Testament, the child who mistreated his parents in any fashion was a shame and a disgrace (Proverbs 19:26). The child who struck his parents was to be put to death (Exodus 21:15). We could make a long list of ways children can show respect—or a lack of respect—for their parents.

When the prophet Micah told how bad conditions were in his day, he said, “For [a] son treats [his] father contemptuously” and a “daughter rises up against her mother” (Micah 7:6). We owe our parents our respect.

**OUR OBEDIENCE**

Obeying our parents relates closely to the challenge to respect them. Children’s failure to obey their parents is a perennial problem. When Paul was describing the decadence of his day, he included these symptoms: “insolent, arrogant, . . . disobedient to parents.”

Some years ago, Eleanor Roosevelt10 wrote in her daily newspaper column, “It might be encouraging to many of us who worry about the state of our world and particularly about our youngsters to remember that today’s problems have existed a long time.”11 Next, she quoted this statement: “Our earth is degenerate in these latter days; bribery and corruption are common; children no longer obey their parents; the end of the world is evidently approaching.”12 Then she revealed that these words came from an Assyrian Stone Tablet, written around 2800 B.C.

Mrs. Roosevelt shared another quotation: “Children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up the dainties at the table, tyrannize their teachers.”13 Those words were written by Plato, three centuries before Christ, quoting from Socrates in ancient Greece.

The teaching of Ephesians 6:1 is simple and

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9The text implies that in some way Ham made light of his father’s drunken condition.

10Eleanor Roosevelt was the wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the thirty-second president of the U.S. (1933–45).

11Quoted by Baxter, 33.

12Ibid.

13Ibid.
straightforward: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Are we to obey our parents because they are always right? No, because “this is right.” Being obedient is the right way to live. The phrase “in the Lord” has to do with your relationship with the Lord, with your being a Christian. If both you and your parents are Christians, that makes your relationship doubly special. Even if your parents are not, you should still obey them, for this is God’s will. “This is right.”

In Colossians 3:20 Paul added another thought or two: “Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.” “In all things” means “in everything that does not go directly contrary to the will of God.” (See Acts 5:29.) The child who does this, Paul said, will please God. Jesus was God’s own Son; but as a teen-ager, He “continued in subjection to” Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:51).

Most see the necessity of guiding small children. Few, if any, children would survive to adulthood if someone did not keep them from wandering onto busy highways or playing with fire. Teens may not realize that they still require guidance, but they do.

What does it mean to obey one’s parents? Does it mean that the child does what his parents say after repeated nagging? No, true obedience means that the child responds quickly, cheerfully, even anticipating requests. That is what God desires, and such behavior is a joy to any parent.

God is concerned about children obeying their parents—not only because of the effect on individual homes, but also because of the effect on society as a whole. Edward L. Kast wrote, By depending upon and obeying parents for long periods, children learn one of the most important things they must learn and that is to trust other people and finally God. If a child does not learn to trust his parents, his capacity for trusting anybody is severely damaged. . . . In the human society there is nothing more obvious than the built-in necessity of children obeying their parents.

Kast pointed out that parents’ disregarding their responsibility to care for their children is as defensible as children’s disregarding their responsibility to obey their parents. He raised the question “Why should anybody obey any-

body?” and gave this answer:

. . . society is a cooperative human effort, and how can society work if no one will honor and comply with others in a reasonable line of authority? When, in a certain society, it is commonplace for children to disobey their parents, all the historians get out their pencils and pads and start writing about the decline and fall of that society. 14

The impact that disobedient children have on society is reflected in this startling law God gave to the children of Israel:

If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town. And they shall say to the elders of his city, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear of it and fear (Deuteronomy 21:18–21).

The New Testament (the covenant we are under) does not teach us to kill children if they do not obey their parents, but the Old Testament commandment is a vivid reminder of the importance of children’s obeying their parents.

Parents are not always right, but if they are really concerned about their children, they will probably be right more often than they are wrong. Teen-agers, if you have parents who care enough about you to put restrictions on you, thank God for those parents!

We owe our parents our obedience.

OUR UNDERSTANDING

The next “debts” that I will mention tie in closely with appreciation, respect, and obedience; but they are important enough to be discussed separately. Next on the list is “understanding.” We owe our parents as much sympathetic understanding as we can possibly give them.

In an earlier lesson, we noted that husbands are admonished to live with their wives “in an understanding way” (1 Peter 3:7). That is not bad advice for every relationship in the home. We should try to understand each other.

14Ibid., 35.
I have heard teen-agers cry, “My parents don’t understand me.” Many of these young people seem to be unaware that understanding works both ways. If you are a teen-ager, have you considered the possibility that the greatest lack of understanding could be on your part? After all, your parents were young once. They know what it is like both to be a teen-ager and to be an adult. On the other hand, you only know what it is like to be a teen-ager. You may want your father and mother to see your viewpoint, but how much time do you spend trying to see theirs?

Some say that being a teen-ager is difficult today—and that is true. Parenting a teen-ager is also difficult. Teen-agers, have you considered that your parents are getting older and are more subject to fatigue? Have you considered the crises they may be going through in the business world? Have you thought about how hard it may be for them to “make ends meet” in today’s economy? Are you aware that your mother may be starting through the change of life or that your father may be facing a “mid-life crisis”?

Some unknown writer humorously expressed the need for teen-agers to understand their parents in an article on “Six Steps to Coping With Your Parents”:15

1. Don’t be afraid to speak their language. Try to use strange sounding phrases like “I’ll help you with the dishes” and “Yes.”
2. Try to understand their music. Play Glenn Miller’s “Moonlight Serenade” until you are accustomed to the sound.
3. Be patient with the underachiever. When you catch your dieting mom sneaking salted peanuts, don’t show your disapproval. Tell her you like her the way she is.
4. Encourage your parents to talk about their problems. Try to keep in mind that to them things like earning a living and paying off the mortgage seem important.
5. Be tolerant of their appearance. When your dad gets a short haircut, don’t feel personally humiliated. Remember, it’s important to him to look like his peers.
6. Most important of all, if they do something you consider wrong, let them know it’s their behavior you dislike, not themselves. Remember, parents need to know that they are loved.16

Our Cooperation

We owe our parents as much cooperation as we can give them. Parents have fearsome responsibilities. First Timothy 5:8 says that “if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” In Ephesians 6:4 fathers are commanded to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” God has given parents the responsibility of providing for their families both physically and spiritually, and someday they will have to give an account for their stewardship (1 Corinthians 4:2). We should make their overwhelming task as easy as possible.

Regarding their responsibility to provide for us physically, we should not complain when we do not have everything we would like to have. Regarding their responsibility to provide for us spiritually, we should be cooperative. When they try to bring us up “in the . . . instruction of the Lord,”17 let us be teachable. The Wise Man wrote, “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and do not forsake your mother’s teaching; indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head, and ornaments about your neck” (Proverbs 1:8, 9). He also said,

My son, observe the commandment of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother; bind them continually on your heart; tie them around your neck. When you walk about, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk to you (Proverbs 6:20–22).

Comparing your parents’ instructions to ornaments is a picturesque way of saying that if you heed their instructions, you will have a beautiful life.18

Many passages emphasize the importance of being receptive: “My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings” (Proverbs 4:20); “Take hold of instruction; do not let go. Guard her, for she is your life” (Proverbs 4:13). Teen-agers, if your parents are trying to teach you what is right, thank God for them.

15 This piece has been around awhile. I updated it slightly, but you can make it even more relevant to your time and place. My daughter Angi says that today’s U.S. parents would listen to the Beach Boys, not Glenn Miller.
16 Adapted from a quotation in Baxter, 37.
17 Fathers have the primary obligation to teach their children, but mothers can and should join in this task.
18 This assumes that their instruction is according to God’s Word. You may want to include in the lesson the fact that all teaching is to be tested by the Word.
Edward H. White was one of three astronauts killed when Apollo I exploded at Cape Kennedy on January 27, 1967. Earlier, he had said this concerning his parents:

> When I was a boy, I don’t suppose I had a more lively interest in faith than most youngsters. But I had parents who knew how to communicate their own beliefs in terms I could understand. My brother Jim and my sister Jean and I never doubted where our parents stood on the question of religion. The Bible in our home was not a book to sit on the shelf; it was out where it could be used. Church was not a seasonal affair; going to church on Sunday was as much a part of the rhythm of life as washing clothes on Monday.19

Our parents are to bring us up “in the discipline . . . of the Lord.” Again, we ought to be cooperative. “A fool rejects his father’s discipline, but he who regards reproof is prudent” (Proverbs 15:5; see also 12:1). When my parents disciplined me, it was because they loved me and wanted me to grow up to be a strong Christian man.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews stated that “those whom the Lord loves He disciplines” (12:6a). Then he drew a parallel between our heavenly Father and earthly fathers: “Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them” (v. 9a). Next, he made this general observation on discipline: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful [I can almost hear children and teen-agers saying, “Amen!”]; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

Teens, if your parents care enough for you to discipline you, give thanks for that also. We owe our parents our cooperation.

**OUR BEST**

We owe it to our parents to be the best sons and daughters that we can be. Regardless of how much lip service we may give our parents, if we do not live right, we are not respectful. When the sons of Jacob did not act right, Jacob said, “. . . Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, . . . .” (Genesis 34:30; KJV). Esau’s bad marriages “brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah” (Genesis 26:35; see also 27:46). We quoted Deuteronomy 21 earlier. Can you not hear the pain in the voices of the parents as they admitted, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard” (Deuteronomy 21:20b)?

The greatest compliment we can pay our parents is to become Christians—real Christians with personal conviction and faith—and then to live the Christian life to the best of our ability. We ought to be the best we can be when we are young. “Even a child is known by his doings” (Proverbs 20:11a; KJV). We ought to be the best we can be when we are old. We ought to be the best we can be even if our parents are dead; we should be faithful to their memory. We ought to be the best we can be even if our parents are not (or were not) Christians. If they are still alive, we may win them to Christ by our examples (1 Peter 5:1–4). If they are not living, we still compliment them by being faithful to what we know to be true.

We owe it to our parents to be the best we can be.

**OUR CONTINUED LOVE**

Finally, we owe our parents our continued love and concern throughout their lives. Some of the truths I have presented in this lesson apply primarily to children still living at home (and especially to teen-agers), but many of the teachings apply to all of us throughout our lives. As long as we live, we owe our parents our appreciation, our respect, our sympathetic understanding, and our effort to be the best sons or daughters that we can be.

Our final discussion is addressed primarily to those of us who are already grown. We are to continue to show and express love and concern for our parents as long as they live. We should do this with our words—words spoken face to face, words spoken over the telephone, words written in a letter. We also should do this with our actions.

One part of this love is caring for our parents as they get older. Earlier I referred to 1 Timothy 5:8: “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.” I applied that passage to parents—and I believe that general application can be made—

19Quoted in Baxter, 38.
but we should understand that in context the passage teaches that grown children should care for their aging parents.20

Once when Jesus was teaching, some Pharisees and scribes came to Him, asking, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” (Matthew 15:2a). Jesus gave this scathing reply:

And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, “Honor your father and mother,” and, “He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “Whoever shall say to his father or mother, ‘Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,’ he is not to honor his father or his mother.” And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites,. . . (vv. 3–7).

The scribes and the Pharisees thought they could avoid their obligations to their parents by telling them, “Anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God)” (Mark 7:11b). Corban is a Hebrew word meaning “that which is brought near”; it was used to refer to an offering. The temple treasury was called the corbanas.21

By using this word [Corban] in a religious vow, an irresponsible Jew could formally dedicate to God (i.e., to the temple) his earnings that otherwise might have gone for the support of his parents. The money, however, did not necessarily have to go for religious purposes. The Corban formula was simply a means of circumventing the clear responsibility of children toward their parents as prescribed in the law. The teachers of the law held that the Corban oath was binding, even when uttered rashly.22

Jesus condemned that human tradition, because a man cannot “honor” his parents without being concerned for their welfare as they grow older. Batsell Barrett Baxter wrote,

No amount of church-going, no amount of financial support of the church, no strict moral-

ity can substitute for honoring one’s parents. One of the tragedies of our supposedly enlightened age is the way we have forgotten and neglected the parents of this society. Medical science has extended the life span so much that the percentage of our population past the age of sixty-five has continued to increase. But medical science cannot solve the human problem of the elderly who are neglected, forgotten, and ignored. The answer to this human problem is the awakening of our consciences brought about by our relationship to Jesus Christ.23

CONCLUSION

Proverbs 28:24 speaks of the terrible sin of robbing one’s father. We would never be guilty of such a heinous crime, we say—but what if we do not give our parents what we owe them? What if we do not give them our appreciation, our respect, our obedience, our sympathetic understanding, and our cooperation? What if we are not the best children we can be? What if we do not give them our continued love and concern throughout their lives? Have we not robbed them of that which is far more precious than gold?

Let us close this series of lessons with a prayer:

God, we praise You for Your wisdom in instituting marriage and the home. We thank You for the blessing that these have been in our lives. Now, we ask You to help us to be the kind of husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, and children that we should be. In our foolishness, we depend on You for wisdom. In our impatience, we depend on You for endurance. In our weakness, we depend on You for strength. May You be glorified in all our homes. In Jesus’ precious name, Amen.24

A NOTE FOR PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

I have used this presentation on Father’s Day. The seven main ideas of the lesson could be written on the chalkboard or put on a chart. You could also put each of the “debts” on a separate keyword (flash) card.

20This passage also speaks of grown children taking care of other older relatives.
21Corbanas is the word translated “treasury” in Matthew 27:6.
24If this lesson is used as a sermon, you may want to use the basic invitation suggested in footnote 7 on page 8.