

Question: Does the command to honor your father and mother include honoring a father who is not a Christian and sometimes creates problems for his children by getting drunk? What would Jesus do?

I am confident that Jesus would emphasize the importance of the command to honor our parents even if one cannot always obey them. While the first four of the Ten Commandments deal with our relationship with God, the following six teach us how to relate to one another (Exodus 20:1-17). The very first of the six commandments is “honor your father and mother.” This seems to indicate the importance God places not only upon honoring parents but also upon the institution of the family. Respect for God’s plan for family is vital to the continuance of God’s people and society in general.

However, respect for family is a responsibility shared by both children and parents. Parents in Israel were commanded to teach their children about God and his law (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). In the New Testament, we are told: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). If either parents or children fail to fulfill their responsibilities to one another, it becomes very difficult for the other to do what has been commanded.

In addition, Jesus would tell us that our relationship with him and God, our Heavenly Father, always takes precedence over any human relationship including the parent-child relationship. No matter the situation, we always “must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Children are also told to obey their parents “in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1). If a parent leads his children away from the Lord or tells them to do anything in conflict with the will of the Lord, the children are not expected to obey him. As a child, Jesus obeyed and respected his earthly parents even up to the moment of his death on the cross (Luke 2:51; John 19:25-27). However, he did cause them some anxiety when he remained at the temple in Jerusalem without their knowledge of it (Luke 2:41-48). When they found him again, he said, “Why were you searching for me? . . . Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?” (Luke 2:49). Business at his Heavenly Father’s house took precedence over his earthly relationships.

On the other hand, I believe Jesus might also remind us of the example of David and his relationship with King Saul (1 Samuel 18-20). After a young David slew the giant Goliath, King Saul took him into his home and gave him a high-ranking position in the army of Israel. During the years that followed, David and Jonathan, Saul's son, became friends closer than brothers; and David became Saul's son-in-law. Some time later, Saul attempted to kill David because he was jealous of David's popularity. One day David could have easily killed Saul in the secrecy of a cave, but David would not do it even though he was urged to do so by his men. Later he said to Saul, "See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you" (1 Samuel 24:11). David behaved righteously toward Saul as a father and as God's anointed King even though Saul had behaved dishonorably in attempting to kill him.

Respect for the family and honor for parents are important to God, but no one is expected to honor a parent in anything that is inconsistent with the will of God or that dishonors our Heavenly Father. However, you can still act in grace and kindness toward your father at least for the sake of the God-given role of parents. With this approach and with God's help, you may eventually influence a change in your father's heart and life. I am often amazed at the good things that happen when people submit themselves to Jesus Christ and his example of patience and forgiving love toward others.

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