

Giving the Blessing to Your Parents

An excerpt from
The Gift of The Blessing
By Dr. John Trent and Gary Smalley

In our final strokes to complete this portrait of the blessing, we need to illustrate the importance of seeing the blessing go full circle. We began painting in a corner of the canvas that showed how parents need to give their children the blessing; we will end by seeing how these same children need to return the blessing to their parents. Helen returned the blessing, even though it was the most difficult thing she had ever done in her life.

A Story of the Blessing

Let's look back at the story of Helen. Helen had been physically abused by her father the entire time she was growing up. He was an alcoholic whose changing moods left her insecure, fearful, and distressed. The first chance Helen had to leave home, she was out the door. From her perspective, she didn't care if she ever saw her father again, an attitude that was confirmed when he and her mother were divorced while she was in college. Helen had absolutely no reason to go home now and refused even to consider the thought.

Then Helen met a coworker named Karen, and her whole life began to change. For the first time, she heard about and received God's blessing of salvation and His provision of a spiritual family at church to help meet her needs. With spiritual fathers galore at her church, Helen felt even less of a need to make peace with her natural father.

Gradually, Helen began to notice that some areas of her spiritual life were lagging behind. She had grown by leaps and bounds, but still had a tendency to criticize others. She had come a long way, but her temper still needed control. For a long time, Helen thought these nagging tendencies did not disappear because of a lack of faith or knowledge of God's Word. Countless times she had committed herself afresh to study God's Word. Yet her struggles continued.

Then one day Helen discovered what was at the heart of her problem. She did not lack faith; she was not willing to honor her father. The deep bitterness and resentment she felt still had an iron grip on part of her life, an area she had not opened up to God's leadership, healing, and love.

When Helen looked closely at her life, she found she was becoming more and more like the person she hated most in life—her father. Until and unless she dealt with the stranglehold he still held on her life, she would find a continuing struggle in her spiritual life and possible destruction in her personal relationships.

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At first, Helen tried to push away the growing conviction that she needed to deal with her relationship with her father. Even thinking about him again hurt her. This is always the case when we remember something painful from the past. Memories bring back with them feelings, and sometimes those feelings are the things we don't want to face. However, Helen knew what was right. While her emotions didn't agree, she knew God honored those who honored their parents. By remaining an enemy with her father, she was doing wrong and was draining herself of life.

Helen went to see her pastor and explained what God had been showing her over the past several months. After several sessions of prayer and counsel, Helen decided to visit her father. Whether he would respond or not, she was determined to bless and honor Him.

On June 14, sitting in the pastor's study, Helen made the most difficult call of her life. She had found out her father's phone number from an old family friend and after praying with her pastor, picked up the phone and dialed the out-of-state number. She made the call at 3:00 P.M., and secretly Helen hoped her father would be at work and not be there to answer the phone. But on the fifth ring, her father answered the phone. God gave Helen the strength to choke out, "Hello, Dad?" After a long silence on the other end, he replied, "Helen?"

In a short conversation, Helen told her father she was going to be flying to his city and asked if she could see him. "Please do, Helen," her father said. She got directions to his apartment and hung up the phone.

The first skirmish had been won, but the battle still lay before her. A hundred times in the four days before her flight Helen talked herself in and out of going to see her father. Yet each time she decided to back out, that still, small voice within her convicted her of what was right. If she received nothing from her father except the pain she had gotten in the past, she knew she still needed to go for *her* sake and do what was right.

Helen did board the plane, and her pastor and several friends came with her to the airport to encourage her and see her off. The flight was both the shortest and longest airplane flight of her life. Helen rented a car when she arrived at the airport and drove the thirty minutes to her father's home. With a deep sigh and a short prayer, Helen walked to his apartment and knocked on the door.

An old, tired-looking man opened the door. (Why had she remembered him as being such a giant?) Sitting on the couch with her father, Helen poured out her heart to him. She told about becoming a Christian and the difference it had made in her life. Then, hardest of all, she admitted the anger and hatred she had carried toward him

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for years and asked for his forgiveness.

By the time Helen finished talking, they were both in tears. For fifteen years Helen's father had denied the burning conviction of his wrongs against his daughter. He asked her to forgive him for being such a terrible father and lamented over all the pain he had caused in her life.

After four hours that seemed like only four minutes, Helen left. At the door she put her arms around her father and heard herself say the words that she never thought she could say: "I love you, Daddy." All the hurt he had caused in her life had not stopped her from loving him. Even during the times when she hated him the most, she still felt an attachment to him and a love for the man who had brought her into the world. Where once she could not express that love or even feel it, now she felt compassion, pity, and warmth for a man who had shattered his own life when he shattered hers.

Helen went back to her home, her office, and her church a new person. Not looking different on the outside, but knowing that on the inside she was more free than she had ever been in her life.

When she had come to know Christ, He had freed her from the guilt of every sin and unlocked the shackles that kept her chained to the past. By having the courage to face her father, to honor and bless him, Helen finally took off the shackles Christ had unlocked. She walked away from her father's house that day free to truly live in the present, because she was at last unchained from the past.

The First Commandment with a Promise

What Helen was willing to do in facing her father took a tremendous amount of courage. However, Helen had a God who understood her fears and gave her the strength to face them.

Is it only those like Helen, who have such a hurtful past, who need to bless their parents? Certainly not. In fact, the Scriptures direct every child to give the blessing to his or her parents.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul goes into detail about what it means to have healthy family relationships. In the fifth chapter of this book he gives a beautiful picture of God's design for the husband/wife relationship. With the man as a loving leader and the woman as a highly valued partner and responder, the stage is set for children to come into a loving home.

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Paul's next instructions are for those children. While under the roof and protection of one's parents, children are to "obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). Then Paul gives a general admonition for children of all ages: "Honor you 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" (Eph. 6:2-3).

What does it mean to honor your parents? We can see that if we will look at the word *honor* in the Scriptures. In Hebrew, the word for "honor" is *kabed*. This word literally means, "to be heavy, weighty, to honor."¹ Even today, we still link the idea of being heavy with honoring a person. When the President of the United States or some other important person speaks, people often say that his words "carry a lot of weight." Someone whose words are weighty is someone worthy of honor and respect. However, we can learn even more about what it means to honor someone by looking at its opposite in the Scriptures.

The literal meaning of the word *curse* (*qalal*) is to "make light, or little weight, to dishonor."² If we go back to our example above, if we dishonor a person we would say, "Their words carry little weight." The contrast is striking!

When Paul tells us to honor our parents, he is telling us that they are worthy of high value and respect. In modern-day terms, we could call them a heavyweight in our lives! Just the opposite is true if we choose to dishonor our parents.

Some people treat their parents as if they're a layer of dust on a table. Dust weighs almost nothing and can be swept away with a brush of the hand. Dust is a nuisance and an eyesore that clouds any real beauty the table might have. Paul tells us that such an attitude should not be a part of how any child views his or her parents, and for good reason. If we fail to honor our parents, we not only do what is wrong and dishonor God, but we also literally drain ourselves of life!

What Happens When You Honor (or Dishonor) Your Parents?

Paul goes on to remind us in this passage in Ephesians that a promise is available to all those who will keep the commandment to honor their parents. However, we need to understand something about the promises of God before we look any further. The first thing to remember is that God's promises are always fulfilled. What God promises, He will see come to pass.

The second striking reality we need to see about this promise is that it is conditional. If you fulfill the conditions of this promise, God will honor that in your life. God's promise to you cuts both ways. If you will honor your parents, this promise will apply. But if you dishonor them, you will have to live life apart from God's promise. Paul tells

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us that two aspects to this promise relate to those who would honor their parents. The first reflects on our relationship with God.

“That It May Go Well with You”

In New Testament Greek, this entire phrase is captured in the tiny word, *eu*. In ancient Greece, this word was used to salute someone with the words, “Well done! Excellent.”³ When you honor your parents, the first thing you can know for sure is that God is saying to you, “Well done! Excellent!”

For God’s people, doing what was right before God has always included doing what was right by their parents. In Leviticus 19:3, Moses commands the people, “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and keep My Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.” Linked with the importance of setting aside a special Sabbath day each week to honor God is the command to be consistent in revering and honoring your parents.

Jesus felt just as strongly that the actions you take toward your parents reflect your heart toward God. If you are dishonoring your parents, you are following the tradition of your times, not the Word of God. Listen to the strong rebuke Jesus gave the Pharisees and scribes who willfully chose to dishonor their parents: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’ . . . But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God” then he need not honor his father or mother’ ...Hypocrites!

Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” (Matt. 15:3-8).

For Jesus, doing what was wrong in dishonoring your parents could never be linked with what was right in God’s eyes. Anyone who urges you to dishonor your parents speaks words of hypocrisy and falsehood. You will only hear a “well done” from your heavenly Father when you honor your parents, not if you dishonor them by treating them as a speck of dust.

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Not only does it affect your relationship with the Lord when you follow what is right in honoring your parents, God promises that it will affect your own life in a positive way as well!

“That You May Live Long On the Earth”

God promises that those who will honor their parents actually receive life! How can this be? Just ask many physicians, counselors, or pastors. They have seen in their offices the shattered lives of those who dishonor their parents, with their strength drained away as a result.

Each of you has only so much emotional and physical energy, and you choose how you will spend it. What physicians and researchers are finding out more and more clearly today is that a close link exists between what we think and how we physically react.

Positive attitudes have been linked with positive physiological changes while negative attitudes can open the door for illness or disease. ⁴When persons choose to hate or dishonor their parents because of anger, bitterness, or resentment, they pay a spiritual, emotional, and physical price.

The Scriptures have shown the strong connection between the words we speak and how they affect us physically. In Proverbs 16:24 we read, “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb; Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” and in a later passage, “A merry heart does good like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones” (Prov. 17:22).

When you decide to honor your parents, you are placing high value on them. God says such actions will increase your life on the earth. However, if you decide to see your life dried up by holding on to bitterness or resentment toward your parents (attitudes of dishonor), you eat up your strength and shorten your very life.

Some people have been dishonoring their parents for years. If that is something you have been doing through your actions or attitudes, you need to deal with it as soon as possible and begin the process of making things right. Otherwise the words of King David can ring true in your life, “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away, through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever-heat of summer” (Ps. 32:3-4 NASB). Paul’s words have clearly demonstrated to us that we need to honor our parents. Yet, practically, how do we do this? Once again, we find ourselves at the doorstep of the blessing.

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How Do You Honor Your Parents?

The book of Proverbs was written to teach us the skill of right living. We have already seen that honoring your parents is the right thing to do, but how is it done? You honor your parents by acting as wise people, not as fools.

Many of the Proverbs talk about and illustrate different kinds of fools. All are people who are not applying God's principles for right living. One vivid description of a destructive fool is found near the end of the book. Look at this description of a worthless, treacherous man. Then go back and see what heads the list of things that characterize him:

“There is a kind of man who curses his father, and does not bless his mother. There is a king who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness. There is a kind-oh how lofty are his eyes and his eyelids are raised in arrogance. There is a kind of man whose teeth are like swords, and his jaw teeth like knives” (Prov. 30:11-14 NASB)

The man pictured above brings pain to those at home and those outside the home. As we have already seen, he also robs himself of life by cursing his parents. However, he is not only being rebuked in this passage for cursing them, he is also being scolded because he did not bless them.

If you want to be a person who honors your parents, you will be a person who blesses them. In providing the blessing to your parents, you truly honor them, do what is right in God's eyes, and even prolong your life.

We have talked at length in earlier chapters (of *The Blessing*) about the five elements of the blessing. We have seen these elements applied to our children, our spouse, our friends, and our church family. Yet where these elements can be of tremendous importance is in providing a blessing for our parents. Each one can be a useful tool in honoring them.

To begin with, your parents need you to *meaningfully touch* them. Even if they have struggled with hugging and touching you when you were young, as they grow older they need the reassurance that comes from being touched.

They also need *spoken words* from their children. Isn't it interesting that Mother's Day is the busiest day of the year for interstate phone calls! For many mothers, these will be the only encouraging words they hear from their children until the next year. Unfortunately, many fathers will hear fewer words of praise. You need to be consistent in your contact with your parents. They need to hear your voice and the

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spoken words of blessing they carry.

It is common for a parent to think back in guilt on the past. The things that often seem to stand out to a parent are not the many positive things they did, but the times they spoke out in anger or did something that accidentally hurt their child. When you bless your parents with words that *attach high value* to them, you can be a tremendous encouragement in their lives. You do not have to pretend a wrong was never committed, but you can forgive them and keep them from self-pity. You can decide to value them highly, to honor them because of the great worth they have to you and to God.

Parents need words that picture a *special future* for them. In fact, for many parents the reason they can only look back to times past is because they do not feel a sense of a future in their lives. You can point out useful and beneficial aspects to your parents' lives, even if those useful qualities are different from when they were younger. You can also point them to the Scriptures and the encouragement that their future with their heavenly Father and spiritual family does not end when this life does.

Something that can help is assuring your parents of their important place in the family as the years go by. In some homes with older parents, the grown children will take over the finances and all major decisions and toss aside an older parent's advice or input. Nothing is wrong with providing a helpful service to your parents, but you should be sure you still honor them in the process. By continuing to ask for their wisdom and advice, you can provide them with a picture of a special future.

One last thing that can encourage a special future for your parents is letting them be a part of your future - the future wrapped up in your children. Providing the time for grandparents and grandchildren to meet and interact can be a tremendous tool for providing your parents with a special future. If you will let them know how they can be and have been a blessing to your children, you honor them in a very valuable way. Of all the ways you can bless your parents, the genuine commitment to walk with your parents through each step in life is particularly important at the end of their lives. Particularly when one parent dies, the other will need an extra measure of your love and commitment to lean on in his or her journey through life.

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Blessing Our Parents While Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

Thus far, we've talked about giving the blessing to our parents in a positive, honoring way. But it's important to state that honoring a parent does not mean that we have to drop all healthy boundaries.

For example, my (John's) father had an explosive temper that came out many times when I was with him. In fact, the very first time I ate dinner with him at a nice restaurant nearly turned into a brawl!

My father had re-established a relationship with us, and after closing a large business deal, took us out to a nice restaurant to celebrate. While World War II had ended twenty years before, in many ways my father had never left the battlefield. And one evidence of that was his thinly veiled hatred for anyone of Asian descent. It didn't matter that our waiter was of Chinese, not Japanese origin. With each round of drinks he ordered, he became more upset with his "slanty eyes," his "poor" service, and "smart #@\$\$" attitude.

Finally, when the waiter was slow getting us our check, my father blew up in anger. He stood up, challenged the man to fight and started towards him. I feel sure that if my older brother Joe hadn't grabbed him and forced him outside (even then Joe was 6' and 220 lbs.), we'd have witnessed the battle of the Pacific all over again.

Keeping his explosive nature in mind, I put strict boundaries around his behavior when he was in my home. He could say or do anything he liked when I was at his home. But like everyone else who came over to my house, if he chose to smoke it would have to be outside. If he chose to drink before he came over, he should hold off on coming that night. And at all times, his words should be civil and without profanity in front of the children.

As you might imagine, the first time I sat down with my father at a Denny's restaurant and explained these family "rules" was an invitation to an explosion. However, we had just moved back from Texas to Arizona, and I knew the time to set loving boundaries was then.

Without judgment, and without a doubt, I wanted to make sure he knew that I loved him. I didn't preach, or condemn him in any way. But I also had a wife and little ones to consider, and a home where I didn't want anyone, even my father, to cross the line into dishonor.

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Healthy boundaries with a difficult parent aren't incompatible with giving them the blessing. I'll have to admit that were times when our family boundaries acted like a wall to him. But every stone was built from his side of the fence.

If you have a parent who consistently "crosses the line" into dishonor, you too may have to establish clear boundaries with them, and have the strength to enforce them despite their reactions.

Coming Full Circle with the Blessing

In honoring our parents as very valuable, we have come full circle in our look at how the blessing in the Scriptures can enrich and encourage healthy relationships. Many of us have never thought in terms of providing our parents with the blessing. But if we will, we can leave them a tangible gift of love that they can carry throughout their lives, just as Don and his brother and sisters did for their parents.

Cindy and I (John) have been to some very creative parties over the years. From "re"gressive dinners to "Roaring Twenties" nights, we thought we had seen them all. Then an invitation came that really caught our attention. We were being asked to attend a surprise, "This Is Your Life" party for an older couple in our church. The party had been planned by the children in this family specifically to honor their parents for years of loving care and sacrifice. It wasn't anybody's birthday, nor was it tied in with an anniversary. It was simply an evening to remember and say thank you for years of commitment to friends and family.

There was not a dry eye in the place by the time the evening was finished. Thanks to the oldest son's, Don's initiative, their parents had received an evening of blessing from their children. As we left this older couple's house, you could see in their eyes that their hearts were bursting with pride, appreciation, and love. These children had provided their parents with an evening that was worth far more to them than any department store gift from their children ever could be.

Please don't assume that "my parents would never let us do something like that for them." If Don's parents had known what was coming, they would have probably tried to talk their children out of the evening. Yet regardless of how difficult it can be for some parents to let their children give back to them, we need to make an effort to bless them.

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At the end of *The Blessing* book, we have included suggestions on how to plan a special evening of blessing for those you love. Has it been too long since you honored your parents with words of blessing? All you need is an active commitment to give back to them what God has already richly given to you.

¹Hebrew Lexicon, p. 457. ²Ibid., p. 866. ³Arndt & Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 317. ⁴Gerald C. Davidson & John M. Neale, *Abnormal Psychology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), pp. 135ff. Copyright © 2004 by John Trent, Ph.D. and Gary Smalley .