

## Sexual Abuse and Honouring Parents

How do we, as Christians, even begin to deal with the issue of parental sexual abuse of a child and the commandment to honour one's parents? How do we respond to the Christian victim of incest who wants to know why/how they can continue to honour their parents given such abusive behaviour? How do we respond to the non-believer's accusation that no loving God could expect a person to honour a parent who has sexually abused them?

Firstly, we need to remember what parents *should* be like in relation to their children. God has given clear principles. Children are a gift from God since it is He that created them (Psalm 139: 13). As a creation and gift from God, parents should be loving and gentle with their children (Ephesians 6: 4; Colossians 3: 21). They should be brought up under the Word of God, teaching them to obey its commands (Deuteronomy 6:7: *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up*).

How are children to act towards their parents? The fifth commandment states that children should honour their father and mother (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Honouring them is also made clear in the New Testament (Ephesians 6:2-3; Colossians 3:20). What does 'honouring' somebody actually mean? It refers to thoughts, actions and words which reveal respect. As children this might take the form of obeying their instructions (Proverbs 13:1) as Christ obeyed his earthly parents (Luke 2:51). When older, we can show honour by caring for their needs (1 Timothy 5: 3-4) and by not speaking ill of them. The Bible relates the honouring of our parents to the honouring of God: Hebrews 12:9 says '*...we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the father of our spirits and live*'.

Whilst the command to honour our parents is clear in God's Word, so too is the command to *obey God rather than man*, if by obeying man one sins before God. In Matthew 10:37 Christ makes very clear that we are to love and obey him first and foremost: *Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*). In 1 Samuel 19 Saul told his son Jonathan to kill David. Jonathan disobeyed his father and warned David. He did this because his father had told him to do something that violated God's law. Ezekiel 20: 18-19 records God's command to the people Israel: '*I said to their children in the desert, "Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*'

Incest is very clearly forbidden. Leviticus 18:6, for example, states that '[n]o-one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations...' A parent's sexual desire for their child not only breaks God's clear design for sexual relations (between a man and woman who have been united together through marriage) but it clearly breaches the God-given responsibility of parents to bring up their children under the law of God. To honour one's parents does *not mean* submitting to ungodly sexual activity. To honour one's parents *does not mean* pretending the abuse did not happen and honouring them anyway. So what does it mean?

### **For the Christian victim:**

God has, through His common grace, instituted a legal system through which a righteous response must be sought. A parent who sexually abuses his/her child is guilty before God and guilty in terms of the law of the land. The victims should wish to seek righteous justice through these means if possible.

If a parent truly repents then the Lord must be sought to give strength to forgive. This is not a replacement for a legal response. Indeed the parent who truly repents would accept that, though their actions may be forgiven, their sin still bears consequences for themselves which must be accepted.

Remember that the sin can be distinguished from the sinner. The sin must be hated and righteous justice sought, but the sinner loved. Anger can be righteous but there is always the danger of it leading the victim into sin (Ephesians 4:26). Justice can ultimately be left in God's hands (Romans 12:19).

A parent who has sexually abused their child can continue to be honoured in the following ways:

- Wanting them to experience no ill apart from that justly consequential upon their sin (legal consequences).
- Providing for them as needed during their later years.
- Speaking of no ill apart from that which relates to the truth of their sin.
- If repentance is sought, seeking the Lord's help to forgive a parent would express a honouring of them.

How easy it is to write of such things. How difficult it must surely be to act in accordance with them. The Christian, however, has supernatural power on their side-the power of Christ who can transform a person's hate and hurt from a desire to enact ungodly revenge to a desire to subject that hurt to God's Word. The world

cannot know or understand this transforming power. The Christian, however, has it at their disposal.

### **For the unbeliever:**

As for the Christian, God has also provided for legal means to seek justice. A parent who sexually abuses their child is guilty before God, whether or not they believe in Him, and guilty before the law. To continue to honour a parent in the way described for the Christian is something that, unless done in the power of Christ, becomes an unsustainable chore which merely conceals pain yet to be truly dealt with. It is legalistic, devoid of the power of Christ and therefore gives Him no glory. The unbeliever's major burden is not to try to honour their parents through gritted teeth but to enter a true saving relationship with Christ. Dealing with the problem of their separation from God is primary. Finding joy in the power of Jesus to help them with the burden of abuse and the challenge of honouring their parents will follow. Meanwhile, they need to be shown the love of Christ in deeds and actions: in a listening and believing heart, in a shoulder to cry on, in a presence to shout at lest their anger becomes inwardly destructive of them, and in simply *being there*. The truth, however, of their own sinful nature before God but his mercy shown in Christ if they only reach out and accept, is a message central to all of God's creatures made in his image including that of the victim of parental sexual abuse.