

How To Honor A Difficult Parent



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Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge, 1769.

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We are all familiar with the commandment God gave in Exodus 20:12 that says, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." But I ask you, do you know what it is to truly honor your parents?

Many people assume that honoring their parents involves doing everything according to their parents' wishes, catering to them, putting their parents first in their lives, even over a spouse and children, and sometimes God. I disagree with this popular thinking, however. For years, my mother and I could not seem to get along or agree on much. Just my very presence seemed to irritate her, no matter how hard I tried not to. Doing exactly as she wanted still left room for strife between us.

This difficult relationship left me wondering, how do I honor someone like this, who is so hard to honor? I spent a lot of time in prayer. God showed me how to set boundaries with her- to say "no" sometimes, and to refuse to be manipulated by guilt. I also learned to keep our conversations superficial- no longer discussing things that my mother used to criticize about me, rather staying on topics such as her life, friends, even the weather. This made my life somewhat more pleasant, without facing as much strife. Yet something else needed to be done... God showed me that I needed to accept my mother as she is. That seemed impossible to me at first- she had been cruel to me many times in my life, how could I accept that? Then God showed me that she was a wounded person, acting out of her own pain and anger. No, this did not make her mistreatment of me right, or even something I could accept. But, it did diffuse my anger at her drastically when I accepted her where she was at that stage in her life.

As time went on, I was still being hurt by my mother, although not nearly as much as before God intervened in our relationship. I saw her being unwilling to face her pain, let alone try to heal, and I could not help. How can you help someone who will not help herself? You cannot do it, I learned. The saddest part was, I saw her anger and hurt growing due to some challenging circumstances in her life. I felt God was telling me to cut contact with my mother,

but I doubted. That could not be honoring my mother, could it? Shouldn't I help her? At the very least, I could be a good witness of God's love so she might want to know Him herself? God really got my attention one day by saying, "Where is the honor in the strife that your very presence stirs with her? Or in being her target when she is angry?" Still I was resistant- cutting contact was a huge step, one that I was unsure I was strong enough to take. Then I finally did it. In 2001, I wrote my mother a letter to end our contact. It was painful, probably the hardest thing I have ever done, but it worked out for the best. In our time apart, I grew closer to God than ever, grew tremendously as a person, and had more peace and joy than I ever had.

Sadly, I realized my rejection hurt my mother, which of course I did not want to do, but I had no choice. I continued to pray for her, and hope she would one day know God and the joy of His salvation like I do. Maybe if that happens, she will understand why I did what I felt was my only option.

Today, after six years apart, my mother and I are on speaking terms again, but things are different. Perfect? No, but much better. She knows I will not tolerate the things I used to, and I am able to let a lot of things go that used to anger me.

Now, do not misunderstand me. I am not saying all parents are bad, and all adult children need to take such drastic measures as I did. In some extreme cases, like mine, I believe separation is the only logical choice. But in most cases, I believe an adult child can honor their difficult parent best by loving them, and setting healthy, firm boundaries that show the adult child will not be ruled or abused by the parent. Ask God to show you what to do and how to do it. He will answer your prayers, and help you to handle your specific situation the best possible way. And, if your situation calls for separation like mine did, then always remember, God is a loving parent. He can and will fill the void of losing your earthly parent, and heal your heart.