

January 30, 2011

THE TREE FROM WHICH THE APPLE FALLS

Richard Cohen, a political reporter, told the story years ago of the day he took his boy, Ben, on a train ride in New York City. The boy had been battling some illness – a rash of some sort that had been uncomfortable – and the trip into New York City was first of all a trip to the doctor. But after the doctor’s appointment dad was going to take his son on a train ride. The boy loved trains. They were his passion. So the train ride was an ample reward for the boy having to cope with this uncomfortable rash. So you can imagine how excited the son was to anticipate not only a ride on a train, but a ride on a train with his dad. After the doctor’s appointment they made their way over to the train station to take a ride in and around the city. When the train arrived father and son hopped on board, minding of course that gap between the platform and the train (always a little hair raising when you have a young child). After getting on the train and taking a couple of steps Ben, the son, looked back and noticed that his father has dropped his work ID back on the platform. “Look Dad, your work ID,” Ben said. Richard, the father, looked back, spotted the ID, and told his son to wait right there inside the train while he jumped out to pick up the card. Just as he was picking up the card he heard his boy yell, “Let me help.” When Richard heard this, he instinctively held up his arm in the universal

parental “no” position. But it was this very gesture, this gesture of protection, that knocked the boy off balance and he fell into the gap between the platform and the train.

Cohen describes the nightmare: “I have covered bloody conflict from Lebanon to El Salvador, and I have never known the razor-sharp terror like that uncertain moment when a little person, your little person, is in mortal danger and you don’t know what to do. I pleaded with the startled travelers not to let the doors close. Trains with open doors don’t move. People were horrified and motionless. Mannequins. I guess no one knew what to do. ‘My God,’ I quickly wondered, ‘where is the third rail, humming with electricity? Ben, don’t move,’ I yelled, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness down there and I saw him half-prostrate in front of a wheel twice his size. He was trying to get to his feet. ‘Put your hands in the air. High. As high as you can!’” Two little tightly clenched fists appear below the level of the platform. I drop to my belly and scoop up the dazed child I had knocked down there in the first place. No hero. Just the survivors of a self-inflicted wound.”

Cohen goes on to write: “In war, your number is up when it’s up. Even at home, on the battlefield that matters, our hold on life is fragile. Sometimes we get only one mistake. Our children can only look up at us. The trust in the eyes of a child is overpowering. Especially when you know you have failed once and been given a second chance.”

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

I'm not sure there is a more emotionally charged or spiritually charged commandment, at least within the Ten Commandments, than this commandment for us to honor our mothers and our fathers. There is likely no enterprise in the human condition more vulnerable to misunderstanding, mistakes and potential failure than the endeavor of parenting. Depending on where you are in age and in birth order and in relationship to your parents, this is a commandment that is either very easy to follow or very, very difficult to follow.

If you were to somehow communicate this commandment to a three or a four year old --- somewhat naïve to the human condition and likely more to trust ... it is a commandment more readily accepted.

Communicate it to an adolescent --- a young man or woman who in this particular stage of life cannot see, refuses to see any redeeming value in mom or dad --- this is a commandment that might be a little harder to swallow.

Later on as you grow older and your parents all of a sudden grow smarter, the commandment takes on a different tone and we can see a little more clearly that parenting is

pretty much a mixed bag. And what you discover over time is that every parent-child relationship is a trial -- often a trial by error, often a trial that meets success and always an inexact science.

Truth is, as I unveil this command to you it likely sends you thinking of your own parents. Who are these people that God gave to me as mother and father and what do I really think of them? Did they do a good job with me? Do I feel like they reported to duty most of the time? Do I lament over their failures? Did they give me mixed signals? Did they, in their effort to protect me, knock me into the gap between train and platform? When I held up my arms did they pull me up? Or did they let me down?

Honor your father and your mother. What is this commandment supposed to mean? Is it to suggest that we are to blindly and uncritically obey our parents regardless of their fallible nature? Are we to see them as anything more than the human beings they are? Are we to ignore any mistakes they have made along the way? What does it mean for us to honor our mothers and our fathers?

At least one Biblical commentator suggests that the Hebrew word for “honor” means “to give weight to.” We are to “give weight to” our mothers and our fathers. And I wonder if that isn’t exactly what God might have in mind when he tells us to honor our mothers and fathers.

Of all the relationships God gives us in our lifetime we are to give considerable weight to the relationship we have with our mothers and our fathers. We are to regard our parents with a great deal of seriousness.

Truth is whether by nature or by nurture, whether by genetics or by child-rearing, our parents are the ones who have and are still shaping us. Their imprint is upon us whether we like it or not. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree, so it is vitally important that we recognize and embrace that who we are has a lot to do with whose we are. And that if there be some very, very good things within us it is likely that God gave many of those things to us through our parents. And if there are some less than good things about us it is not unlikely that we picked up at least a few of these things from mom and dad. So if only for the sake of self-understanding it makes all the sense of the world to give great weight to our parents.

Of course, a psychotherapist could have said the same thing. But to "honor" or "give weight to" our parents is more than just an exercise in understanding ourselves. It's also to understand ourselves in light of who God created us to be and who God is still creating us to be. Give weight to your parents in order to understand what great gifts God gave you in how you were created and shaped by them, but also give great weight to your parents to understand more clearly in what places of your life God still needs to shape you. You see, your parents had and have great power over you, and that power, for better or for worse, has shaped you and is

shaping you even still. And sometimes that is a really good thing and sometimes it is really not such a good thing. But as powerful as your parents are and were, they are not God. And it is important as we honor our mothers and fathers to understand where our parents leave off and where God picks up.

I am one of four sons. Three of us are pastors like my father, grandfather and great-grandfather. The fourth son is severely retarded. Four more different boys you will not find. And what you will see in each of us is that by God's grace we each inherited some really good things from our mother and father, each of us inheriting different qualities. And what you will also see is that we also inherited some not so good things from mom and dad. And the challenge for each of us boys as we honor our parents, which we do most greatly, though they are now gone, is to give great weight to that and to rejoice in all the good things and to ask for God's help in all the bad things.

But you know it goes even more deeply than that. Because I think when God commands us -- doesn't suggest to us, but commands us to honor our father and mother -- he is calling us to embrace without reservation the opportunity and the challenge to enfold with love and mercy these most significant people of our lives. God says to us that it is with our parents that we have the greatest chance to experience what true love and what true mercy is all about.

The truth is no parent gets it right 100% of the time, but the last time I checked none of us does. I would join the apostle Paul – and say that I am chief of all sinners. Of course there have been falls between the cracks along the way. For some of us the falls have seemed seldom and for others the falls have seemed frequent. But within all those falls have there not been a few rescues -- a few times when we got pulled up?

Boy it sure didn't take me long as I started out as a parent myself to figure out that I was leaning heavily upon the mercy of my child as I carried out this trial by error enterprise of parenting. All of us need only to think of Mr. Cohen's inadvertent push of his son into that gap to know how easily it could have been anyone of us and how in our own way we've been guilty ourselves of causing our children to stumble.

So God says to us honor your mother and your father, love this man and this woman who gave you life. Love them not just for their loveliness but love them for the whole thing. Love them even for the times when they stumbled. And have mercy upon them as much as you would hope for your own to children to have mercy upon you.

I love that story that Bart Starr (the former quarterback of the Green Bay Packers back in the 1960's, and if you think my mention of the Green Bay Packers is to suggest my allegiance in next week's game – you're right.) once told of how he had made it his practice that whenever

his son brought home an “A” on his report card he would give him a dime. One Sunday Starr played just a disastrous game against the Chicago Bears. Threw three interceptions and lost two fumbles. And when he came home late that night his son had already gone to bed. But on the kitchen table he left his dad a note. “Dad, I thought you played a great game.” And with the note there was not one dime, but two dimes.

I’m not sure how you do it. Each of us is going to have to do it in a different way. But it seems that what the Lord requireth, what he commands us to do, is before all is said and done or even after all is said and done, in our hearts or with our words or by our actions, we find some way to leave with our parents, our mothers and our fathers, not just one dime but two dimes.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.