
**How do I obey both God and my parents
when it seems like they want me to do different things?**

By Jacob Townsend

One of the many beautiful aspects of more collectivistic cultures like those in South Asia is the priority given to family. Generally speaking, there is a greater respect and gratitude offered toward parental authority than in most Western cultures. South Asian children often recognize and appreciate the sacrifices that their parents have made for them, and in return feel obligated to return that love. It is rare indeed to see a South Asian parent end up in a nursing home. One of the beautiful aspects of American culture, however, is the encouragement toward creative, individual expression. Parents seek to highlight the strengths of their children and encourage autonomous flourishing. South Asian Americans are raised in the tension of these two competing values. When the best of both cultures is balanced, this can be uniquely beautiful. However, there are times South Asian parental authority seems to crush individual expression. There are also times when children seeking to express themselves can be led to rebel against or disrespect their parents. As a result, the following articles seek to speak into the tension between obeying parents and individual expression from a Biblical perspective. Specifically, what should a South Asian American follower of Christ do when she feels that God has individually called her for a specific pursuit, but her parents do not see it that way?

Obeying Parents is a Biblical Command

South Asian culture is right to highly honor and respect one's parents. This is a command that is present in both the Old Testament (Exod. 20:12) and the New Testament (Eph. 6:1-2; Col. 3:20). Let's look at the command given to Christian households in Col. 3:20-21:

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”

The command to obey parents is all-inclusive. Children are to obey their parents *in everything*. No exceptions to this are offered in the text. When this is done, the Lord is pleased. This means that it is essentially an act of worship unto God when children choose to obey their parents. There are three common objections to this which must be addressed before proceeding:

- 1) If I am a college student doesn't that mean I am no longer a child, but am now an adult? As such, I am no longer under any obligation to obey my parents.
- 2) But my parents don't follow the provision to not provoke/exasperate me, so why do I have to follow the command to obey them? Isn't this Scripture a two-way street?
- 3) What if my parents command me to do something that goes against my conscience?

Let's consider each of them in turn.

What defines a child?

In many ways, adulthood is a culturally-defined concept. In Paul's Jewish context, someone was considered an adult once they turned 13. In modern American culture, someone is legally considered an adult once they turn 18 (or 21) and it is true that one of the majorly defining aspects of college years are the many transitions into adulthood that are taking place. In Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus affirms the Creation teaching that marriage transforms one's primary relational obligations from that of one's parents to that of one's spouse. As a result, there might be some truth to this objection, but I would caution being quick to form judgments based on this. Adulthood is not instantaneous, but rather a process. It is not like Jewish children from Paul's time suddenly stopped obeying their parents when they turned 13. Rather, they probably obeyed them up until marriage no matter how old they were. Furthermore, this Greek word for child (*teknon*) is often used to refer to those who are clearly adults (cf. 1 Tim. 5:4), indicating relationship not age. For today's American context, whether South Asian or any other ethnicity, I would challenge someone who makes this objection to consider the ways they still depend on their parents in a childlike way. Do your parents pay for your college tuition, housing, rent, food, or phone bill? If you still depend on them for many or most adult responsibilities, is it really fair to claim that they have no right to exercise any God-given authority over your life?

But my parents aren't fulfilling their end of the bargain!

It is important to recognize that Paul is writing to a Christian audience, so this system obviously works best when parents are giving their children commands from a Christ-centered perspective. It is much easier to obey and follow those who speak lovingly and obviously have your best interests at heart. That said --at risk of stating the obvious-- the common platitude that "two wrongs don't make a right" applies here. In what way could someone's parents disobeying a command of God possibly justify his or her own disobedience? You must obey your parents because it pleases the Lord, not because they are amazing parents and deserve your obedience by virtue of their awesomeness. Your obedience is ultimately an act of worship unto God and you should obey them because it pleases Him, not them.

Do I have to obey when they want me to do something wrong?

There are times when one's obedience to parents exists in tension with one's obedience to God. In these instances, God must always be obeyed over parents as He is in supreme authority over one's life. This will be further discussed below, but for now it must be acknowledged that obedience to parents cannot be used to justify sinful behavior. Before moving on, though, I would like to argue that parents must still be obeyed even if they are not believers themselves. God is sovereign and has chosen to give them authority over your life. Similarly, God has sovereignly given our government authority over our lives (Rom. 13), but Paul gave the command to obey one's government in a clearly secular and even anti-Christian context. So long as non-Christian parents do not command us to do something against God's will, they must be obeyed. They must be obeyed because this pleases the Lord and the way in which they are honored and obeyed can even be a powerful testimony to the

Gospel. God may use faithfulness in this manner to soften the hearts of unbelieving parents toward a relationship with Him.

The Call to Obey Jesus is Greater Than the Call to Obey Parents

As stated above, the call to obey one's parents is exceptionally overruled when God's will for your life is different than your parents' will for your life. This may seem intuitive, but let's ground it in Scripture. Jesus makes this point using shockingly strong language:

“If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” - Luke 14:26

This statement is particularly offensive to those who love their parents and have a positive relationship with them. Does Jesus really mean that to follow God we must *hate* our parents? How could that possibly mesh with obeying and honoring them? A parallel passage (Matthew 10:35-38) helps explain that Jesus is talking about when a parent's wishes and God's wishes don't align for one's life. When this happens, a greater love for parents than for God will cause significant problems in discipleship. As such, one's love for God must be so much greater than one's love for parents that by comparison it is as if they hate their parents. In fact, disobeying parents to obey God may be interpreted by the parents as hate or disrespect, even if that is not the intention of the child. When it comes to a choice between Jesus or Mom and Dad, Jesus must win every time. We must have no other gods before him, parents included (Exod. 20:3).

Conclusion

Generally speaking, God always wants us to obey our parents. In the next study, we will explore how to identify those instances of genuine tension between God's will and that of our parents. In those cases, obeying God is more important than obeying our parents, but this parental disobedience must still be done in a way that honors and respects them.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) When is it difficult for you to follow the command to obey your parents? In what ways do you find yourself trying to rationalize disobedience to them?
- 2) How does the idea that God in His sovereign wisdom chose to give your parents authority over your life affect your willingness to obey and honor them in all things?
- 3) Have there ever been times when you believed that what God wanted you to do and what your parents wanted you to do were in conflict? How did you handle that conflict?
- 4) Do you find that the approval of your parents is sometimes more important to you than God is? What would it look like for you to surrender this idolatry to God so that you can live more fully for Him?

Recommended Resource for Further Study:

- *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* by Jeannette Yep, Peter Cha, Susan Cho Van Riesen, Greg Jao, and Paul Tokunga.
- “Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus Promo Video” by Nabeel Qureshi (<https://youtu.be/nGCsx2cdCo0>)

**Godly Disobedience:
Honoring Your Parents While Going Against Their Wishes**

By Jacob Townsend

"You are our sovereign, our Government...If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner and without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute-books. We will never obey them. Award us for it what punishment you like, we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us, we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We will gladly die and will not so much as touch you. But so long as there is yet life in these our bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary laws." – **Mohandas K. Gandhi**, "On Civil Disobedience"

Civil disobedience is a peaceful refusal to comply with certain laws viewed as unjust. The protests of Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King Jr. in the USA are prime examples of this philosophy lived out. At its core, civil disobedience derives from a respect for the government alongside an unyielding passion for what is right. Tension is created when governmental authorities enact immoral commands. In these cases disobedience to the government does not necessarily have to be a lack of respect for its authority. MLK put it this way "Any man who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail in order to arouse the conscience of the community on the injustice of the law is at that moment expressing the very highest respect for law." King was motivated by faith-based convictions to pursue civil disobedience. Although Gandhi was not a Christian, he personally attributed much of his ethical philosophy to Jesus.

We can learn from their examples when considering the analogous idea of disobeying parental authority. Their willingness to die to themselves and suffer the costs associated with their disobedience reflects Jesus's teaching on the kind of discipleship that leads a child to disobey his/her parents. Immediately after his strong words about hating parents, Jesus encourages those who want to be his disciples to "count the cost" and pick up their own crosses in imitation of him (Luke 14:27-28). Some clarification, however, is needed concerning how to discern when there is a genuine tension between what God is asking of us and what our parents are asking of us.

How to Discern a Genuine Tension

Given God's decision to place our parents in authority over our lives, it would be unwise to form rash conclusions about circumstances where He might be calling us to obey Him over them. In other words, you better be sure it is God's will that you are following and not your own. God does not look favorably upon using spirituality as a guise to neglect other duties, especially obligations toward our parents. For example, consider this stern rebuke that Jesus offers the scribes and pharisees in Mark 7:9-13:

"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother,

“Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

Similarly, Paul says that a child who has financial means to provide for parents who are in need and fails to do so has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:3-4, 8). This language seems just as strong as the call to hate one’s parents, so it is important to make sure we are understanding these things correctly! Although both of these examples are financial, it is clear from Jesus’ words that the call to honor one’s parents is the issue at heart. The pharisees and scribes weren’t encouraging people to follow God as of supreme importance. Rather, they were making up “their own tradition” and then using that tradition as an excuse to **disobey God’s** command to honor parents. This brings us to our first practical point: check your heart.

Check your heart to make sure that what you want to do is truly God’s calling and not merely your own emotions being projected upon God’s will. Spend time in honest prayer and reflection before the Lord. Earnestly examine the Scriptures. If what you believe God is calling you to do conflicts with his Word, then it is definitely not the leading of the Spirit. If it isn’t spoken of in Scripture (positively or negatively), it may be from the Spirit or it may be from your own heart. It is not wrong to have personal desires or potentially even to act on them, but it is wrong to blame them on God when they only belong to you. If it is merely a personal desire, explain it to your parents as such and lovingly try to win them to your point of view, but don’t use it as an excuse to disobey them. That would dishonor both your parents and God.

To assess whether it is solely a personal desire or the prompting of the Spirit, try to unearth the motivation behind what you feel led to do. Is it guilt? Is it people-pleasing? Just like parents shouldn’t be idols in your lives, neither should your peers or fellow believers. I pray that students in my ministry never take steps of faith motivated by a desire to make me happy or to win my approval. Rather, I want them to be motivated by the Gospel and a deepening love for their Savior. Consider what ways any disobedience toward your parents might enable you to grow in your love for God or advance His kingdom. If there is no obvious way that disobedience will aid in your discipleship, the odds are greater that it is something you are making up. If you can’t explain to your parents a vision for why God is leading you to go against their wishes, how could you expect them to come to an understanding of what He is doing in your heart?

Lastly, it is important to consult the body of Christ. Proverbs 11:14 states, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Don’t examine your heart in isolation for others are often better equipped to see our blind spots and biases than we are alone. Invite those you trust to be honest with you to provide input into your decision. If your friends, pastor, discipler, Design staff member, and your parents are all hesitant about something you believe God is calling you to do, wisdom behooves that you consider their concerns. Similarly, if God is truly leading you to go against parental wishes, a community that confirms this call of God in you can be a great support in any difficulties that may follow your act of disobedience.

Disobeying Well

If after engaging in this process you still think that God is calling you to disobey your parents, it is important to consider *how* you go about disobeying them. We look up to figures like Gandhi and MLK not just because they defied oppressive governments, but because of the way they went about disobedience. Thankfully, most of our parents aren’t oppressive in similar ways and often have our best interest at heart. Regardless, we should honor our parents by the manner in which we disobey them.

Communication is Key

Communication is probably the most crucial factor in considering how to honor parents. Secretly disobeying them or lying about what you are doing is not the answer (Col. 3:9-10). We must be willing to lovingly explain to them what we are doing and why we are doing it, even if they don't understand or agree with our decision. If they get angry or yell, we are not justified in returning the favor. One of the best ways to honor your parents is to invite them early into the decision-making process.

All too often I have seen students bring their parents into a decision at the last minute and when their mind is already made up. When parents aren't immediately on board, they blow up at them in anger and accuse them of hindering their walks with God. They then self-righteously disobey their parents, convinced that none of the problem rests on their own shoulders. Other times they choose to obey their parents over God, resulting in inward shame or bitter resentment toward their mom and dad. In both cases, the parents are dishonored. In one the dishonor is explicit and in the other it is concealed, but they are both dishonoring. Just like God works in your own heart over time, the same is true of your parents. Give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to convict, guide, and transform them alongside what He does in you. Genuinely value their input and seek to understand their concerns. God has made them your parents for a reason and even their misguided commands are often motivated by a loving concern for you. Don't forget that! Believe that God can change their hearts and earnestly pray for that reality.

Be Willing to Suffer the Consequences

Lastly, if you are going to disobey your parents, you must decide beforehand that you are willing to suffer the consequences of that disobedience. In an extreme case, they might threaten to cut you off financially or even relationally. In other cases they might revoke privileges like vehicle use or internet access. If disobeying them is truly God's will for you, then you have to count the cost and decide beforehand that Jesus is worth it to you even if those threats become a reality. God doesn't promise that making difficult decisions for Him will make our lives easier. In fact, He says that in order to follow Him we'll have to bear our own crosses and suffer on His behalf. But the treasure of Jesus is worth every possible difficulty! Let your parents know that you respect them so much that you are willing to accept any consequence they wish to enact in light of your disobedience. This will communicate that you are disobeying them not for lack of respect for their authority, but because you truly believe it is the right thing to do.

Conclusion

The following studies will seek to apply these general principles toward specific scenarios concerning time management, dating, and missions. Each study begins with a hypothetical story that representatively reflects the experiences of those consulted in interviews. These interviews were conducted for a qualitative research study about discipleship needs of South Asian American students.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do you think someone can discern God's will?
- 2) What would it look like for you to more actively invite your parents into your thinking about God's will for your life?
- 3) Think about a time when you believed that what God wanted you to do and what your parents wanted you to do were in conflict. How did you feel toward your parents in that conflict?

Recommended Resources for Further Study:

- "Discerning God's Will" by Kenneth Boa (<https://bible.org/article/discerning-will-god>)
- "God's Will" by Ravi Zacharias (https://youtu.be/H_lvn2kx6fU)

**Balancing my parents' priorities for my life with my own:
How should I spend my time?**

By Jacob Townsend

Hypothetical Story

Dad: You should be spending your time doing something productive! Why are you just hanging out with friends when you should be studying...don't you want to get into medical school?!

Jobin: I'm not just hanging out with friends! Design is a community that points me to Christ and is teaching me to walk more faithfully with him. Don't you want me to grow in my relationship with God?

Dad: Of course I do, moné, but right now God has called you to be a student. You honor him when you work hard and focus on your studies. Once you get a good job and settle down with a family, then you can focus more intentionally on your walk with God

God Should Always Be the Number One Priority in Your Life

For some of you reading this, the above dialog might seem all too real. You could swap your name with Jobin's and everything would make perfect sense. For others, it might not describe any kind of conversation you've ever had with your parents. Wherever you are coming from, the above words draw attention to an important aspect of Christian living: stewardship of time and talents.

When my friends think through issues of how they should invest the time that God has given them, I often share a simple truth: God is always your number one priority. This is almost always acknowledged and affirmed, but unfortunately this acknowledgement rarely bleeds into practice. I too am guilty of this. It is my firm conviction, however, that there is never a time when God calls us to put our relationship with Him on hold to invest in other things. We may convince ourselves that these other things will pay spiritual dividends in the future, but I believe that is a delusion. For example, I may say that I am not making time to read the Bible because I'm so busy. And because I believe God has called me to do all that I am doing, I convince myself that I can't cut anything out of my life in order to make more time for Him. As soon as I have some free time, however, I waste it all by binge-watching Netflix.

Rarely do I binge-read my Bible in a similar manner.

This is because the problem is really my priorities and not my lack of time. I pay lip service to God as my number one priority, but my actions speak louder than my words. Some of us may waste a lot of time and genuinely have more availability in our schedules than we think. Others of us may genuinely have packed schedules -- ones even packed with noble causes -- but if we can't find time for our personal relationships with God, then our schedules reveal where our true priorities lie. Many good things are not worth the sacrifice of what is most important.

If we aren't faithful to live for God now, we won't be faithful to live for Him in different, future circumstances. This is because the circumstances are not the problem, our hearts are. I think this is the

idea that Jesus was getting at in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25: 14-30). The servants who eagerly anticipated their Lord's return stewarded the finances he entrusted to them faithfully. Since they were faithful with the little he had given them, the master gave them more upon his return. They entered into the joy of their master and received a "well done, good and faithful servant!" from him. In contrast, the third servant had a harsh view of his Lord. He dreaded the Lord's return and as a result made unwise use of his talent. Ironically, the very judgement he feared came upon him as a result. Let us not be like the third servant, but like the two servants who in joyful anticipation of our King's return seek to use all of our time and resources for the glory of God! Oh how I long for the day when Jesus might call me a good and faithful servant! I blush at the thought because I feel unworthy of it, but it is one of my deepest desires. I want my students and I to steward our lives for God's purposes. But how do we do this?

Having a Kingdom Perspective

There is truth in what Jobin's father said to him. If God has truly called someone to be a student, he is honored when that person stewards his gifts of intellect and educational opportunity well. That said, the idea that we can live out a calling for God's glory at the expense of our personal walks with God is problematic. God's purposes for our lives do not conflict and we should be careful to spend our time in accordance with His will. Consider Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 5:15-17:

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."

We are to make the most of every opportunity. Why? Because the days are evil! Time is fleeting and every moment we have been given is a moment to be lived in light of eternity. If it is truly impossible for someone to intentionally invest in spirituality and go to medical school at the same time, then God has not called that person to medical school. Plain and simple. It would require too many wasted opportunities along the way. If, however, God has truly called someone to a certain vocation, then we can trust in God's sovereign ability to make that future a reality. This is especially true when that servant makes a decision to live for God's kingdom in the here and now. Consider the words of Jesus:

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." - Matthew 6:24-34

How you spend your time greatly matters to God. Seek first His kingdom and righteousness and all that you need to live it out will follow. The idea that you need to worry about providing for your future so that you can later live for God reverses the biblical order. Jobin should seek God's kingdom first, and if he has truly been called to medical school then God will honor any sacrifice he makes to ensure his number one priority is his relationship with God.

The Value of Fellowship

Before moving on to some practical tips for discussing these things with your parents, I want to make the point that fellowship with other believers is a necessary investment of time. It is not only God's will that we personally spend time in his Word and in prayer and on mission, but it is also his will that we spend time doing these things in community. Consider the following passage:

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” - Hebrews 10:23-25

“The Day” referenced at the end of this verse refers to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, as referenced in the parable of the talents. What we see here is that community plays a vital role in stirring us up to use our time and resources for love and good deeds. Or to put it negatively, to fail to meet together will hinder our ability to seek God’s kingdom. The Greek verbs for “give up” and “encourage” are present active participles, meaning they describe continuous action. As a result, if we truly want to live for God, we need to meet regularly and meet often with people who will encourage us to live for Him.

Engaging with Parents

First, I encourage you to regularly communicate with your parents about what God is doing in your life --both through your personal quiet times and also through community. If your parents are fellow believers, they will probably be excited to see you growing in faith. They will come to see the value in how you invest your time as they catch a clearer picture of the fruit it is bearing in you. If they aren’t believers, it will help them to understand how important your faith is to you and also give you opportunities to engage them in spiritual conversations.

Second, it is important that you address your parent’s concerns. If they are worried about your academic habits, help them see that you do care about your grades and that you are doing your best. Sometimes your parents might make you feel like you are never doing enough, but in these times it is important you first remember that your value lies in God’s unconditional love and acceptance. After that, it is important to remind yourself that your parents probably put this kind of pressure on you not because they are disappointed in you, but because they love you. Even if it feels unloving or misguided, they might believe it is the best way to encourage you to succeed. Be honest with them about how that pressure makes you feel and maybe they will soften their language toward you.

Lastly, maybe your parents are right and you actually aren’t being faithful to what God has called you to do as a student. If this is the case, take to heart their concerns, but work with them toward a solution that won’t hinder your walk with God. Let them know that you are listening to them and you understand them, but cutting out something like your only group bible study is not the answer to the problem.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Think through your weekly schedule. Does it reflect that God is your number one priority?
- 2) What are your parents’ expectations for how you spend your time? If their priorities are different from your own, what can you do to discuss their concerns with them in humble conversation?
- 3) How does regular fellowship encourage one’s walk with God? Share about a time this truth became real for you.

Recommended Resources for Further Study:

- *Don’t Waste Your Life* by John Piper
- “Dismantling the South Asian American Dream” by Linson Daniel (<https://vimeo.com/56491004>)

**My parents often tell me “no” when I try to take steps of faith.
What should I do?**

By Jacob Townsend

Hypothetical Story

Anisha: Hey mom, can I go on this international mission trip during the summer? It seems like a really exciting way to serve God!

Mom: No, I will not let you go. It's not safe. It's my job to protect you and I won't let you put yourself in harm's way. Why don't you serve God at a church here? You don't have to travel to live for Jesus.

Anisha: It's so unfair! You never let me do what I want!!

A Major Point of Conflict

One of the biggest points of conflict between Christian students and their parents concerns steps of faith. I have observed that this is especially true for South Asian American women who try to do something that involves travel. Whether it is road-tripping to a conference or support-raising for a missions trip, something new or uncertain can bring out the fear-based aspect of parental instinct. This isn't necessarily bad. There is truth in what Anisha's mother said to her. Part of what it means to be a parent is to care, provide for, and protect one's child. Parents are given their authority by God so that they can aid you in your flourishing and well-being. The instinct that drives a concern for your safety is a natural expression of this responsibility. There is a fine line, however, between wise caution and faith-crippling fear. For parents, there can be a strong temptation to be more motivated by a fear of the world than by a fear of the Lord.

Seeking First the Kingdom of God

In the last article we looked at Matthew 6 from the perspective of time (i.e. worrying about **the future**). In this article we will look at this same passage from the perspective of emotion (i.e. **worrying** about the future).

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? **Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes?** See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **So do not worry,** saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be

given to you as well. **Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.** - Matthew 6:24-34

I think the reason that Jesus highlights worry in contrast to kingdom living is that worry is one of the major hindrances to living for God's glory. It is not that we shouldn't seek to provide for our basic needs or that we should intentionally put ourselves in risky situations. Rather, the point is that we shouldn't let concerns about temporal needs distract us from eternal purposes. When we (or our parents) do this we are forgetting that we serve a God who is sovereign over every dimension of life. We live like the pagans --non-believers who don't have faith in a providential and loving God-- when we let worry hold us back from mission. A few verses after Jesus commands us to seek first His kingdom, He offers these thoughts about the contrast between our earthly parents and our heavenly Father:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” - Matthew 7:7-11

When Jesus calls the parent He is speaking to evil, He doesn't mean that he has ill-intentions for his son. In fact, He makes the point the the father wants to give good gifts to and provide for his children! He calls him evil to point out that all earthly parents are imperfect and corrupted by sins. In contrast, the heavenly Father is perfectly loving and perfectly wise. As a result, we can trust that He has our best interests at heart when we take steps of faith. If your earthly parents are holding you back from taking steps of faith because they are worried about you, it might be that God is calling you to engage them on this issue so that He can expand their trust in our heavenly Father.

Given all of *my* flaws, I know my parents are more than justified in worrying about me. That said, I am encouraged they have found peace in the risks I feel led to take for God. They've found it not by trusting in my abilities or their own, but by surrendering their anxieties about my life to the flawless God who holds it perfectly in his control.

Your Parents Object Because They Love You

I don't have Scripture to back this up, but I truly believe that it takes more faith for your parents to surrender you to God than it does for you to surrender yourself to God. It is easier to live for the kingdom yourself than it is to let someone you have spent your whole life protecting from the evils of this world confront them directly in the name of Jesus. Your steps of faith are forcing them to decide if they love Jesus or if they love you more. Just like it is difficult to “hate your parents” for the sake of being Jesus' disciple, I suggest that it is even more difficult for parents to “hate their children” for the sake of the Gospel. Did you notice that Luke 14:26 mentioned in the first study calls not just you to hate your parents, but also calls your parents to hate you? If your parents love you more than they love Jesus, they won't be willing to let you pick up your cross and follow Him.

The reason your parents hold you back from taking steps of faith might be that they love you too much. It's hard to fault them for this because it is their job to love you. Furthermore, our culture thinks that “loving too much” is a contradiction in terms, but its not. When you love someone more than you love God, you either love that person too much or you love God too little. Most of us are idols in the hearts of our parents, and a desire to follow God wherever He leads forces them to confront that reality.

Engaging with Parents

If your parents are also believers, I encourage you to consider ways you might incorporate them into your spiritual life. If you are reading the Bible with them and praying with them on a regular basis, then they will witness first hand God's transforming work in you as it happens. They won't be so blindsided when you explain to them the kinds of things that you feel God is leading you to do. Students often reveal the burdens God has put on their hearts to their parents after they have been wrestling with them for several months already or sometimes even years. Then, when it is crunch time to act on those God-given burdens, they drop it on their parents from out of nowhere like an unexpected atomic bomb.

Why should we expect our parents to instantly become ok with something that it took God several months to convince us of ourselves? We will honor them better if we invite them into the decision-making process alongside us rather than simply informing them of our decisions after they have already been made in our hearts. In fact, if we take seriously their sovereign role over our lives, we should earnestly desire their input into our decisions. This isn't a guarantee that they will ultimately see things our way, but they will likely better understand the motivation behind what we decide to do even if they are uncomfortable with it. For more practical tips about discussing missions with parents, I highly recommend reading the article by Kim Ransleben listed below.

Next, if your parents have practical concerns about safety you can be of great help to them when you intentionally seek to demonstrate that you are indeed taking wise steps to ensure your well-being. Give them the phone number of a missions team leader or staff member and let them process their concerns with them. The Cru Summer Missions Parents' page (referenced below) is also a helpful resource specifically for missions trips with Cru or Design.

Conclusion

Our parents can sometimes be the biggest barrier between us and our faithfulness in taking a step of faith in obedience to God. When these tensions arise, we do well to remind ourselves that they could exist primarily because our parents love us and are concerned about our well-being. In fact, God has given them the responsibility of being concerned about our well-being. Praying with them and talking through their concerns early and often is a great way to honor them as you seek to follow God.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is a step of faith you can take to live for greater kingdom purpose? (It doesn't have to be surrendering your life to missions, but I would certainly encourage that! Not all needs are equal.)
- 2) What are some worries that hinder you from taking steps of faith?
- 3) Do you ever feel that your parents hinder you from taking steps of faith? If so, in what way?
- 4) What is something God is doing in your heart that you can share with your parents this week?

Recommended Resources for Further Study:

- *"The Biggest Barrier to Students Going on the Mission Field"* by Kim Ransleben. This article is extremely insightful and also very practical.
(<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-biggest-barrier-to-students-going-to-the-mission-field>)
- Cru Summer Missions' Parents Page
(<https://www.cru.org/us/en/opportunities/mission-trips/summer/learn/parents.html>)
- This video from two South Asian parents speaking to other parents. The Johns Family encourages other parents to let their children follow God's lead in taking steps of faith:
(<http://designmovement.org/design-conf/info-for-parents/>)

What is the Biblical View of Dating and Marriage?

By Jacob Townsend

Dating is not biblical. I say this to be intentionally provocative, but what I mean by it is that dating is not in the Bible. This, however, does not mean it is unbiblical. The fact of the matter is that dating is a social construct. It is a cultural means to the end of marriage. Cultural practices are not bad so long as they do not violate biblical principles. Other examples of cultural means to the end of marriage are arranged marriage and courtship. All three of these systems seek to provide a pathway to marriage. While the Bible does not have much to say about how one gets marriage, it does have a lot to say about marriage itself. As a result, one's view of marriage should inform one's view of dating.

Over the years I have seen much conflict and confusion among South Asian Americans about dating and marriage. Before opening those cans of worms, however, I want to provide a clear picture of marriage as described in the Bible.

A Biblical view of Marriage

Ultimately, marriage is a metaphor for the Gospel. It is supposed to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:22-33). This means that marriage is intended to point people to God and bring glory to His name. Because of the purpose of marriage, you shouldn't consider marrying someone (whether love marriage or arranged) who doesn't encourage you to live more passionately for Christ than you would as a single person. Paul drives home this point here:

“Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion... I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”

- 1 Corinthians 7: 6-9, 32-35.

What we see here is that both marriage and singleness are blessed gifts from God. Marriage itself is not the goal, but living to please the Lord is. So while dating is a means to marriage, marriage is a means to pleasing God more effectively. Paul wants everyone to seriously consider if they could live more pleasingly for God as a single person than as a married person. He does not command

singleness, but he himself was single and suspected that many like him could live more fully devoted to Christ if they also remained single.

I once quoted this passage to my parents as a joke and they weren't too thrilled with it. I suspect that your parents wouldn't like the idea of you remaining unmarried either. In reality, this passage is not a joke. It is the very word of God! If our goal is to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, we need to think deeply about whether any potential partner will aid us or hinder us in that endeavor. It is better to remain single than to marry someone who will distract you from God.

Arranged Marriage vs. Love Marriage

Because the means to getting married are cultural constructs, South Asian Americans live caught in the tension between two vastly different worldviews about how one should get married. Western culture by and large is a dating culture. In the USA, we individually date to find the love of our lives. When we fall in love, that is how we know who we should marry. South Asia by and large contains arranged marriage cultures (although in the present day this is far from the uniform means). You and your parents may have vastly different views concerning how you should get married. As a result, it is important to communicate with them and come to a mutual understanding about what is the priority in marriage.

I once wrote a facebook status that read: "Calvinism = Arranged Marriage. Arminianism = Love Marriage." I work in ministry with South Asians from various theological persuasions, but go to a majority white Reformed church. The differences in response to my status were enlightening. My South Asian friends (regardless of their theology) loved the status, making jokes and positive comments about it. Many of my Caucasian American friends got offended, stating that I didn't understand the love of God within Calvinism. I assured them that I wasn't trying to caricature Calvinism, but maybe they thought I was because it was they who didn't understand the love between spouses found within many arranged marriages. From my perspective, either an arranged marriage or a love marriage can reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church. Likewise, either system can be corrupted by sin.

In many ways love marriage is a reflection of individualism as the highest value and arranged marriage is a reflection of collectivism. If you are pursuing a love marriage, I would encourage you to consider the reality that your choices affect more people than just yourself. If you only consider what will make you happy, then you run the risk of hurting and ostracizing your loved ones. The mentality that marriage exists to make *me* feel happy and special is dangerous. I think it is at the core of why so many more love marriages end in divorce compared to arranged marriages. Once the newness of exciting romance wears off and the difficult realities of commitment to another broken individual kick in more clearly, the grass suddenly becomes greener on the other side. When marriage stops serving the purpose of satisfying one's every need, its foundation crumbles and becomes unsustainable for many. Love is not simply a feeling. Rather, it is a choice. It is more about serving your partner and meeting their needs than it is about meeting your own needs.

In contrast, arranged marriage clearly grasps that marriage is a commitment to unite with one another in covenant. However, the loving service aspect of marriage can often be one-sided (sometimes abusive even) or absent. The perspective is often that men exist to provide for their families and women exist to serve the men. Christ's example, however, is that a husband should lead his wife by serving her, placing her interests above his own and treating her with gentle consideration (1 Peter 3:7). This shows that love in marriage is more than an emotionless obligation or imbalanced contract.

Marriage in the biblical view is not simply love and it is not simply a commitment. Rather, it is a commitment to unconditionally love. And the best way to love one's spouse is to help them honor the Lord with his or her life. As a husband, I must remember that I am responsible to someday present my wife to Christ (her true bridegroom) as holy and blameless in His sight (Eph. 5:27). Marriage is a temporary blessing, a mere shadowy reflection of the joyous eternity found in relationship with God.

The Caste System and Racial Prejudice are Sinful

The hypothetical scenarios in the next article show that the pursuit of marriage/dating can reveal racial prejudice in the hearts of either you or your parents. Racial prejudice is clearly unbiblical, but a parent's desire for their child to marry someone of a similar cultural background might be motivated by something other than racial prejudice. Consider this, if your grandmother only speaks Tamil, maybe your parents want you to marry a Tamil-speaking Indian so that your spouse can have a meaningful relationship with your extended family. Maybe it is not because Malayalam-speaking people or people from different ethnicities are viewed as inferior. Don't be so quick to judge your parents without first seeking to understand their motives.

It is true that some passages in the Old Testament forbade the Israelites from marrying foreign wives (e.g. Deut 7:3), but this does not mean that interracial marriage is wrong. When those passages are studied in context it is revealed that those commands were given because the foreigners would turn the hearts of Israelites against the one true God and cause them to run after other false gods (Deut. 7:4). This is exactly what happened to once role models like Samson or Solomon. Again, the heart of marriage is to live for God's glory, and most non-Israelites at that time did not serve YHWH. When an interracial marriage would indeed serve to glorify God, it was perfectly acceptable and even celebrated (e.g. Ruth and Boaz). Cross-cultural marriages can even display the unity in diversity bought by the Gospel in a uniquely God-glorifying way!

Dating Constructs

Within American culture, many conflicting things can be meant by the term "dating." It could mean getting to know someone in order to decide if you want to enter into a relationship with them (**D**ivine **A**ppointment **T**o **E**ncourage). Dating could also mean that you are in an exclusive romantic relationship. I won't say there is one right way to practice dating, but since dating is a means to marriage I don't see much point in casually dating simply to be in a relationship. If you can't see yourself marrying the person you are dating, all you might be doing is exposing yourself to unnecessary sexual temptation or harmfully messing around with another's heart and emotions.

Conclusion

A biblical view of marriage should inform one's practice of dating. The next article will keep this view in mind while offering practical tips concerning how to engage parents about this highly sensitive topic.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Do you want to get an arranged marriage or love marriage?
- 2) Do your parents want you to get an arranged marriage or love marriage?
- 3) What do you personally value in a potential dating/marriage partner?

Recommended Resources for Further Study:

- *I, Isaac, Take Thee, Rebekah* by Ravi Zacharias
- *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller

How do I honor my parents when it comes to dating/marriage?

By Jacob Townsend

3 Hypothetical Stories

Pranav's story: Pranav knew that his parents would never approve of him dating, let alone of him dating someone from a different family background. As a result, when he started developing feelings for a Pentecostal girl even though he was Brethren, he decided to date her without his parents' knowledge. He was not willing to enter into that fight with his parents at this time.

Anjali's story: Anjali was completely taken aback when a white boy asked her out on a date. She didn't know how to reply so she asked if she could have some time to think about it. As she thought about it, she started to develop feelings for the boy. As a result, she decided to bring up the situation to her parents. They were completely against it and immediately shut her down. She decided to obey her parents, but secretly resented them. She told the boy no and he criticized her for placing too much stock in her parents' opinion. He also called them racist. She was hurt by his words, but held bitterness against her parents in her heart.

Rahul's story: Rahul knew he was in love. He couldn't stop thinking about her and knew that she would be a good relational fit in his family if they got married someday. He mentioned his desire to date this girl to his parents. He did not think the conversation would be easy, but he was nervously hopeful that they would consider it. When they told him no he exploded at them in rage. He told them that he was going to do what he wanted anyway and that if they wanted him to be happy they would just have to learn to be ok with it. Rahul and his love began to date, but both of them felt rejected by his parents and harbored negative feelings against them.

Introduction

I would propose that there are better ways to engage the dating conversation with parents than any of the examples above. I know godly people who have dated secretly, but personally I don't see a way that the kind of action taken by Pranav is honoring to his parents or takes seriously their authority. Reflecting back on the principles of godly disobedience explained in lesson 2, if someone is not willing to suffer the consequences of engaging their parents in a difficult conversation, then they aren't being willing to suffer for what is right. This suggests that their convictions about the relationship aren't likely being motivated by a desire to follow after God, but by their own desires.

I will not say that it was explicitly wrong for Anjali to have obeyed her parents or for Rahul to have disobeyed them. What makes those actions right or wrong is a matter of how well they aligned with God's will and also how they went about carrying it out. I think Anjali was actually right to listen to her parents since she wasn't convicted by God to pursue the relationship with this boy, but suppressing her feelings and then resenting her parents for that decision is not honoring to them. There is also room for her to engage her parents about racial unity and how that connects to the Gospel. Rahul, on the other

hand, both disrespected and disobeyed his parents. If it is truly God's will for him to someday marry his love, they will have a lot of relational bridges to mend with his family.

A Better Way Forward

We are far from perfect, but I would like to offer the example of my wife and I as one worthy of some degree of imitation. I am not saying what we did is the only way to go about it, but I am glad we didn't take one of the above three paths. I am white and my wife is Indian. We met and developed feelings for each other on a missions trip. We were attracted to each other based on our mutual desires to live for God's kingdom in overlapping ways. When I expressed my feelings for Chithra to her, she told me that the feelings were reciprocated and that she had already approached her parents about the idea of entering into a relationship with me. This is clear and incontrovertible evidence of the existence of God and his grace toward messed up people like me! Unfortunately, however, she said that we could not enter into a relationship because her parents did not approve of it. Their main reason for disapproving of it was that I was from a different cultural background.

I didn't know how to process this news, but at the time it seemed decidedly against the unifying Gospel of Christ for the primary reason of my rejection to be based on my skin color. Although I would later learn that it was more nuanced than that, I agreed with Chithra that the approval of her parents was necessary and that it was not right for us at this time to move forward without their blessing. It was Chithra's firm conviction that the sovereign God would by his Holy Spirit bring her parents' wishes and her wishes into alignment if we were meant to be married someday. I agreed with that to a certain extent, but I ambitiously wanted to fight for their approval. I was infatuated and willing to eventually go against them if they didn't budge after we had given it our best and most sincere attempt.

Thankfully, God did bring her parents to approve of me and that has been a great confirmation to us of His hand of blessing upon our marriage. We didn't date until we had their approval to do so. Even though the feelings were there, we believed by faith that if our relationship was ordained by God, He would use the authority of Chithra's parents (who are fellow believers) to sanction it in a special way. We trusted the Holy Spirit to bring our wills into alignment. I waited 2.5 years to start dating the woman who is now my wife. Most people consider that a little crazy, but I wouldn't change it for anything. I wouldn't change it because I have a wonderful relationship with her parents on account of my patience. They treat me as their very own son and I view them as truly my beloved parents. I also consider them my good friends. When I asked Chithra's Dad for his final permission to date his daughter, he told me how honored he felt by my willingness to hear the concerns of him and his wife. They had come to approve of me in part because of the ways I had sought to honor them prior to dating.

Not every story has a happy ending like this, but I do believe it is important to take seriously a biblical value like parental approval and not dismiss it in the name of a cultural value like romantic feeling. I would like to share one last point from our story. After we began dating, I learned that Chithra's parents did not disapprove of me initially because I was ethnically different. Of course they had their cultural preferences, but they had Gospel-informed reasons for being hesitant about me until they knew more about me. You see, Chithra and her parents are converts from Hinduism and their decision to follow Christ put a giant strain on their relationship with their own parents. Their family is conservative and anyone who marries outside of the caste runs the risk of being disowned. Her parents were still engaging their families with the Gospel message and were worried that if Chithra married a white American man they would be cut off from the family and lose future opportunities to continue engaging them with the love of Christ.

To add insult to injury, there was the fear that as an American I would just end up divorcing Chithra after first reeking havoc upon their family dynamic. This is obviously a stereotype about divorce and American culture, but there is painful truth in it even with regards to the Church. Honestly, those sound like pretty darn good reason to reject me. Praise God that despite these concerns they were able to trust God with them and I was able to marry my love! Even though our marriage has indeed put some strain on relationships with extended family members, the door for the Gospel is still open and many of them even do approve of me!

What to do when Parents don't come around?

As I mentioned above, not every story will have such a happy ending. That said, I do believe you should do your best to fight for the blessing of parents. You honor them by believing that their continued presence and favor in your life is something worth pursuing. The road may be messier, longer, and more difficult than just moving ahead without them, but it could pay major dividends in the long run.

But what if the path never smooths out? *What if you take the hard road and those relational dividends don't ever come?* Then at least you can rest easy knowing that you glorified God by seeking to honor your parents. At the end of the day, it is an act of worship and you should do it not simply because you want your parents to respond positively to it, but because it pleases the Lord.

To be frank, I don't have all the answers and I can't give you a formula that will guide your best actions in any and every situation. A decision like marriage is one of the most important decisions a person can make. It affects the rest of your life and how you will best live for eternal purposes. As such, the ultimate decision is best made between you and God and your future spouse. Honest, open, and humble communication with parents, however, is still essential to navigating these immensely confusing waters. If you or your love interest's parents never approve, you still need to honor and respect them. Ask God to give you wisdom (He promises to do so! - James 1:5), seek the advice of others who have gone through similar situations, and rely on your community of faith for comfort and encouragement.

Conclusion

The goal of marriage isn't to make you happy or to make your family happy. Rather, the goal is to glorify God. I would like to close this article with one final practical tip: Bring up this conversation before the issue becomes personal. Work through the differences of expectations between you and your parents while emotions aren't yet heavily invested. Talk to them about arranged marriage, love marriage, singleness and the kind of person you would like to marry. It will be lot easier to honor them in your words and attitudes if there isn't a current relationship at stake in the outcome of the conversations. If your parents and you have clear understanding between one another before you ever desire to pursue marriage or dating, you will save both yourself and them a lot of heartache. Maybe you are sensing a trend in the advice offered in these studies: communicate early and often with your parents. I keep sharing this because understanding is a process and you also probably need their wisdom. This series has not exhaustively covered every tension you will experience in your relationship with your parents, but setting up a healthy habit of honoring communication with them should be helpful for any possible issue you might face.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Do you have any fears or concerns associated with talking to your parents about the concepts of dating or marriage?
- 2) What would it look like for you to respectfully fight for your parents' approval? Is there anything that prevents you from believing that God has the power to change their hearts?