



# You Never Stop Being a Parent

Thriving in Relationship with  
Your Adult Children



Jim Newheiser  
& Elyse Fitzpatrick

A most needed book. I often meet with parents who are seeking direction about how to handle adult children who have spurned the Christian beliefs, values, and standards of their parents. This book will be of immense help. Thanks, Jim and Elyse, for giving parents a biblically based book with solid guidelines for knowing the most God-honoring and helpful way to navigate this valley. May God use this volume to strengthen parents in this situation and help them point the way back to him all the clearer.

—**Wayne A. Mack**, Professor of Biblical Counseling, Grace School of Ministry in Pretoria and Capetown, South Africa

Wise, compassionate, much-needed counsel for parents of adult (or nearly adult) children. Jim and Elyse clearly present the responsibilities of lifelong biblical parenting solidly within the context of God's absolute sovereignty. I'm not aware of another book like it on the market today and highly recommend it to all who truly desire to rightly influence their children all the days of their lives.

—**Carol J. Ruvolo**, Conference Speaker, Author of Bible Studies including *No Other Gospel* and *Before the Throne of God*

Jim Newheiser and Elyse Fitzpatrick have given the church a Christ-centered, biblically and practically wise book, seasoned with rich experience as counselors and parents. Although books on parenthood seem to never end, here is a unique contribution that deals with an issue that is by and large ignored: parenthood and adult children. They cover the multifaceted issues with skill and grace. As a pastor who counsels and a parent of adult children, I am very thankful for this book. I will be using it and distributing it in our church.

—**Brian Borgman**, Pastor, Grace Community Church,  
Minden, NV

The question of how parents should relate to their adult children, who too often have an entitlement mindset while at the same time refusing to take the hard and sacrificial steps to become independently functioning adults, has become a minefield of potential conflict. So how do you cut the apron strings? What does love demand? What does God expect? And how can parents sort through the turmoil of knowing when, where, how much, and how long to help? The authors wisely and humbly guide us through some of the biggest struggles, basing their answers on biblical principles as well as personal experience gained from their own lives and the hours they've spent counseling others. This book doesn't give pat, easy answers, but it does offer hope and practical steps for how to please God that are buoyed with grace and humility. As a parent of five children who are now making their own transition into adulthood, I was convicted, encouraged, and strengthened to do better. I'll be turning to this book again and again and passing it on to others who are looking for godly counsel as they walk through what can be a confusing season of figuring out how to relate to young adults who are no longer children, but will always be your child.

—**Brad Bigney**, Senior Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church,  
Florence, KY

This is a wonderful book written for parents who are hurting and want solid biblical answers that speak to the heart. This is not a book on mere parental techniques or behavioral changes. It is a book that takes parents to the foot of the cross and causes them to take an honest look at their own hearts and their parenting. Furthermore, it is not a book on parenting theories; it is a book born from years of the real-life parenting and counseling experiences of both of

the authors. If you are a struggling parent, this book will bring you refreshing hope in handling your role from a biblical perspective.

—**John D. Street**, Chair, Master of Arts in Biblical Counseling Graduate Program, The Master's College and Seminary

I never speak on the topic of raising children without facing the inevitable questions about how to respond to adult children who are struggling with the transition between childhood and adulthood. *You Never Stop Being a Parent* answers the most frequently asked questions with biblical clarity, wisdom, and insight. This book will help parents to think with clarity about the many issues raised by interacting with adult children. The answers it gives are not only clear and practical, but richly gospel-centered and filled with hope. This is a book I will buy in bulk and recommend to many.

—**Tedd Tripp**, Pastor, Conference Speaker,  
Author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart*

Jim Newheiser and Elyse Fitzpatrick have given the body of Christ an excellent treasure in *You Never Stop Being a Parent*. There is no other Christian book quite like it. With a solid biblical background guiding the principles they share, with practical wisdom from many years of their own in-home and now out-of-home parenting, and with direct but sensitive admonishment for those parents who are struggling to build lasting, godly relationships with their adult children, these two parent counselors have provided us with a great deal of valuable assistance. So as parents of adult children, whether you are frustrated or fulfilled, may this helpful volume bring you much encouragement.

—**Lance Quinn**, Pastor-Teacher,  
The Bible Church of Little Rock

Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jim Newheiser have written a very practical book based on biblical principles to help parents of adult children. The style is engaging and the advice very wise. I wish that I had had this book years ago, before our oldest child got married!

—**Martha Peace**, Biblical Counselor, Author of  
*The Excellent Wife* and *Damsels in Distress*

Perfect timing. Just as the questions from parents with adult children start streaming in, we have solid, biblical material to put in their hands. And the book is packed. No sooner did I think, “But what about . . .” before the next illustration set me off on a wise course. Thank you.

—**Ed Welch**, Director of Counseling, Christian  
Counseling and Educational Foundation

Sometimes these later years can be some of the most challenging for parents, but in this book you will find lots of direction, compassion, and hope. The reader will quickly catch that the authors are fellow sinners and fellow sufferers who speak to us as brother and sister in the Lord. From this humble perspective, several “hot” issues (courtship, parental authority, in-laws, grandparents, etc.) are dealt with biblically, using lots of real-life stories and practical applications to help the reader see how the principles are lived out in real life. The authors stress the importance of relationships giving priority to the parent’s own heart and responses and to the marriage bond. As they flesh out what it means to be loving, faithful, and courageous and to trust God with our children, they continually point us to the person of Christ and all the resources we have as Christians—the Spirit, the Word, the church, and so on. After all this, the appendices at the end of the book again offer important practical helps such as tools for resolving conflicts and sample contracts between parents and young adults. This is one book that every parent needs to have and read!

—**Stuart W. Scott**, *Executive Director,*  
*National Center of Biblical Counseling*

You Never  
Stop Being  
a Parent



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Your Adult Children

Jim Newheiser and Elyse Fitzpatrick

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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To  
Jim and Caroline,  
loving parents and faithful servants

—E.F.

In memory of my father and my grandfather,  
both of whom exemplified many of the principles in this  
book,  
and with thanks to the parents and adult kids  
who opened their hearts to us,  
allowing us to use their stories to help others

—J.N.



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# Introduction



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I concluded a sermon on child training by saying that our parenting responsibilities finally end when our children become adults. After the service, one of our older friends, Elmer, put his arm around me, smiled, and said, “Jim, you never stop being a parent.” I had no idea then how true his words would be in my life.

At the time, our kids were all still at home, but Elmer’s comment made me think. I observed how he and his wife, Evelyn, were still very involved in the lives of their children, some of whom were close to my age. For instance, when one of their sons was injured, Elmer traveled across the country to be at his side and help keep his business afloat until he recovered. Another son and his wife are missionaries in Mexico,

Although this book is a collaboration between Jim Newheiser and Elyse Fitzpatrick, unless otherwise specified, all of the first-person statements are Jim’s. Scattered frequently throughout the book, you’ll also find personal testimonies or advice from parents just like you. These statements were culled from Jim’s counseling experiences and from surveys of families whose stories probably intersect with yours in many ways. Permission to use these statements was given and all identifying names and situations were changed.

and they often visited them and shared in their ministry. In addition to making these frequent out-of-town trips, Evelyn was also involved in homeschooling a granddaughter who lived in the area. Elmer's life proved his point. He never stopped being a parent.

My understanding of our ongoing responsibilities as parents grew when I read a story in our local newspaper about a woman who was celebrating her 105th birthday. Discussing her closeness to her children, the article quoted her as saying, "Well, they're not kids anymore, but they are to me." Her children were seventy-four and seventy-five years old, and even though they had been adults for over half a century, they were still her "kids." And, as I began to learn, if you have children of your own, you'll never stop calling them your "kids" either.

Over the past several years, my wife and I have watched our three sons enter into adulthood. We're thankful that we have good relationships with each of them. We have learned a lot as we watched our boys turn into men, but the truth is that this transition involved a steep learning curve for us. While we were traversing these sometimes stormy days, I often felt like we were in uncharted waters. I tried to find biblical resources to help us navigate these rocky shoals, but nothing was available. Of course, there were plenty of solid Christian books about parenting young children. In recent years, there have even been some very useful additions about parenting adolescents and dealing with teenage rebellion. But there wasn't anything that addressed the unique challenges Caroline and I were facing—challenges that confronted both us as parents and our sons as adult children.

The conflicts and difficulties between parents and their adult kids aren't merely issues among Christians, either. *Time* magazine had a cover story about the social phenomenon of "twixters," a term referring to adults who are still living at

home<sup>1</sup> and who remain in-between adulthood and childhood. In many ways, they're more like overgrown kids when it comes to managing mature responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> In the movie *Failure to Launch*, Matthew McConaughey portrays a typical twixter, a thirty-something slacker who has finally driven his parents to desperation. Determined to be free from this albatross, they hire an expert to engineer circumstances that, they hope, will launch their son out of their home. While things don't work out exactly as they planned, their son does finally move out, and the film ends with the parents gladly singing, "Hit the Road Jack."

That this twixter phenomenon is becoming part of our day-to-day lives was made plain to me a few months ago while walking through the Phoenix airport. I saw a young man sporting a t-shirt that boldly declared, "I still live with my parents." I knew that he was making an attempt at humor, but I wondered why he would wear a shirt like that.

The Christian community is facing unique challenges of its own regarding this problem, as many young adults are deciding to leave the faith after being raised in Christian homes. Barna research reports that six out of ten 20-somethings who were involved in church during their teen years have dropped out of actively participating in Christian activities.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, as the first generation of homeschooled kids are graduating and entering adulthood, many have failed to meet the high expectations of their parents. These are not children who fail to leave home. These are children who fail to embrace the faith of their home. Homeschool leader Reb Bradley writes,

In the last couple of years, I have heard from multitudes of troubled homeschool parents around the country, a good many of whom were leaders. These parents have graduated their first batch of kids, only to discover that their children didn't turn out the way they thought they would. Many of

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these children were model homeschoolers while growing up, but sometime after their eighteenth birthday they began to reveal that they didn't hold to their parents' values. Some of these young people grew up and left home in defiance of their parents. Others got married against their parents' wishes, and still others got involved with drugs, alcohol, and immorality. I have even heard of several exemplary young men who no longer believe in God. My own adult children have gone through struggles I never guessed they would have faced. Most of these parents remain stunned by their children's choices, because they were fully confident their approach to parenting was going to prevent any such rebellion.<sup>4</sup>

Well-intentioned parents, who have devoted two decades of their lives trying to shape their children, are having a hard time letting go of their adult kids, especially when they make choices of which they do not approve. What authority do parents have over their grown kids? What should parents do if their children make choices with which they disagree? One parent we interviewed writes, "Somehow, we thought that when the children reached eighteen, our parenting would be pretty much over. On the contrary, we discovered that our most challenging years as parents were in the vicinity of ages eighteen to twenty-three. . . . When the children were small, parenting was simple—not easy, but simple." Another parent wrote, "I would have never imagined it would be this hard."

In addition to relating with our own adult sons, I also serve as a biblical counselor with the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD) in Escondido, California. Over the past several years, a large percentage of my cases have involved conflicts between parents and their adult kids. I've seen first-hand the very kinds of problems I've introduced here. I've also seen parents who seek to micromanage their adult kids, treating them as though they were still children unable

to make mature choices for themselves. I've helped families in conflict over dating and marriage choices, over adult kids in trouble with debt or the law, and even over what the role of parents should be in the lives of their grandchildren.

The hours we've spent in counseling with real families like yours have been enriching to our souls. We're extremely thankful for them because we've seen the power of God's Word displayed in the lives of his people as they have gained confidence in his will and have experienced the blessing of his presence and wisdom. We trust that you'll experience the same blessing as you learn what it means to say with Elmer and with us, "Even though it is sometimes difficult, I'll never stop being a parent."

One thing I've learned through all of this heartache and conflict is that a book that comes at these issues from a consistently biblical point of view is desperately needed. Because we fully believe in both the infallibility of Scripture and the sufficiency of God's Word to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17), this book will probably be different from others you have read. This book is based on the assumption that Scripture is sufficient not only to tell us how to gain salvation, but also to help us establish wise, godly relationships with our own adult kids.

This book is unique in another way too: Rather than relying on a list of formulaic steps, it will point you to the cross and to the one Man who had a perfect Father, and who was a perfect Son. It's because of his incarnation—he actually lived in a normal family with a mom and dad, and brothers and sisters—that we can assure you that he has experienced every temptation you're facing now. It's because of his sinless life, the way he perfectly loved his heavenly Father and his family, that you have access into God's presence as a forgiven, justified child. It's because of his death on the cross, which paid the price for all your sins—not just the big ones but even the seemingly

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insignificant ways that you've loved yourself or your children more than you've loved God—that you can stand before your Father completely sinless and completely righteous. He's also your risen Lord who conquered death and the power of sin to free you from slavery to the old way of doing things. You can change because Christ is risen! And finally, the gospel message reminds us that Jesus Christ is now ruling as Lord over all, sovereignly superintending everything that happens in your life and in the lives of your kids. Jesus Christ has also sent the Holy Spirit to live in your heart and assure you that these struggles aren't all there is. You may be suffering deeply now, but there is more than this life to focus on.

While it's true that parenthood ends when we enter eternity, if you're a Christian you can be completely sure that God will never stop parenting you. He has promised never to leave you nor forsake you; he is your Father and that will never change. He will always protect you, provide for you, and pardon you. He is your merciful, everlasting Father. In this truth, you can rest and face the day with confidence. This world and these difficulties aren't all there is. There is a heavenly Father to whom you can address all your concerns and who bears you on his heart. (If you're not sure that you're a Christian, please turn to the back of this book to appendix C for clarification.)

# 1

## Is It That Time Already?



WHEN KATE LEFT for college she intended to study music, but her parents insisted on a premed track. By working very hard, she was able to major in music and also complete the premed requirements her parents preferred. But now she's a senior and faces a difficult decision. Her father insists that she continue on to medical school to fulfill his dream of her becoming a doctor and ensuring her financial independence. Kate on the other hand longs to be married and have a family. She's already met a fine Christian man and would like to get married when they graduate in May. To make matters worse, Kate was raised as a conservative Anglican and her boyfriend is a Baptist. Her father cannot bear the thought of his grandchildren not being baptized as infants, and therefore has forbidden Kate to marry her boyfriend unless he becomes an Anglican. Kate wonders if she should comply with her father's wishes

and pursue medical school. She's confused about God's will and wonders if she's free to marry when her parents don't approve. What should she do?

Bill and Eileen have worked very hard to build a successful business. They have sought to give their children every material and educational advantage. While they enjoy very pleasant relationships with their twenty-four-year-old son, Pete, and their twenty-two-year-old daughter, Jane, Bill and Eileen are deeply concerned that their children aren't getting anywhere in life. Pete made it through three years of college studying to be a nurse, but now isn't sure whether he wants to continue. He has dropped out of school and is living at home, working part-time at a fast-food restaurant. Bill and Eileen are concerned that he's wasting time playing video games instead of planning his future. Jane's goal is to be a wife and mother, and she doesn't see any point in furthering her education. While she is definitely helpful around the house, her day isn't fully occupied. She spends hours on Facebook connecting with friends all over the country but has no marriage prospects.

Bill and Eileen love their children, but they wonder if they are enabling laziness. They can't understand why their kids aren't motivated to make something of themselves. "When we were their age we were full of drive and ambition. What is wrong with kids these days?" they wonder. Sometimes, after working long days, Eileen gets angry because it seems like her kids are living off her and Bill's labors without having to work hard for themselves.

Wayne and Kathy have five wonderful children ranging in age from ten to nineteen. While parenting has had its challenges, generally they feel exceptionally blessed. Their family is very close and each of their children seems to genuinely respect their parents. Recently, however, Wayne and Kathy have been troubled by changes taking place in their eighteen-year-

old daughter, Danielle. Danielle has always been a compliant child and a great help with her younger siblings. Now, however, Danielle is changing, challenging some of her parents' standards in terms of clothing and entertainment. Also, Danielle wants to go away to college instead of following her parents' plan for her to take classes at the community college, while helping out at home. Perhaps most troubling, Danielle no longer wants to attend church with the family but is interested in trying out some of the more contemporary churches where her friends attend. Wayne and Kathy aren't sure what they should do.

In each of the stories above, parents and their adult children are in conflict. Kate is compliant and obedient but questioning just how far her parents' authority rightly extends into her adult life. Pete and Jane are typical twixters, living off their parents' labors and not really getting anywhere. Danielle is living at home but beginning to question her parents' authority. As each of these stories illustrates, people are complex and their relationships are often a tangled web, woven over decades. For this reason, none of these stories is black-and-white, and each requires wisdom from the Lord.

### ***Wise Living Is the Goal of Our Parenting***

Most parents understand that childhood was designed to be a temporary season of training—a time to equip children to live as wise, independent adults. It is toward this goal that many of us have prayed and labored for years. Mothers and fathers understand that all too soon our little ones will be heading off to college, walking down the aisle, or simply promising us they'll call. Parenting is a temporary season of our lives, and it's one that we'll have to say good-bye to, perhaps before we're ready.

This brevity is God's design. It isn't merely cultural mores; it is part of God's creation order. From the very beginning, the Lord declared that sons and daughters would leave their parents' home and establish new homes of their own (Gen. 2:24). Even if our young adults don't marry right away, they're still expected to move beyond childhood and mature into adults as 1 Corinthians 13:11 says: "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things" (NASB).

But brevity doesn't mean insignificance. This season of parenting is so significant that an entire book of the Bible is written about it. Proverbs is written as a training manual for parents to equip their sons and daughters to live as wise, independent adults in the world. "Our goal in training and discipling our children, is to bring them to maturity," one teacher writes. "If we are so blessed, they become self-governing and ready for adulthood long before it is time to release them from the home."<sup>1</sup> In the conclusion to his excellent book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, Tedd Tripp writes, "The parenting task comes to an end. We are no longer the on-site shepherds. That aspect of our relationship is done. This will be true whether they marry or just take their place as an adult in their community. God intends for it to be a temporary task."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Prepare Yourself for the Empty Nest***

Does anyone really enjoy change? Even when our lives are fraught with difficulty, the difficulty we're familiar with always seems better than the difficulty we haven't known. Letting go of our role as parents, even if that role has become stressful, can be troubling and even frightening. Some couples have built their relationship around their children and now fear what might happen when they leave. What will we talk about

if not the kids? Will our relationship be able to withstand this test? Do we even have a relationship aside from our children? Some mothers, after having devoted more than twenty years to training their children, don't know what they'll do with themselves when the kids are gone. One father writes, "For my wife who was a stay-at-home mom, the hardest aspect of dealing with our youngest child was the radical change in involvement. . . . To use my wife's own words, 'I went from first string involvement to being a bench player.'"

No one likes being replaced on the starting team. No one enjoys facing futility or obsolescence. None of us take pleasure in facing the truth that one very significant portion of our life's work has come to an end. None of us like change, particularly when the change means that our identity and relationships must be reshaped.

### ***It's Not Really an Empty Nest***

It's easy to see that the strength or weakness of a marriage is a major factor in how parents deal with children leaving. If a marriage is strong, even though saying good-bye to kids marks the cessation of a very significant relationship, the spousal relationship can be sustaining and enriching during this trial. If, on the other hand, a marriage is weak and is built around the children rather than the parents, these good-byes can seem almost unbearable.

We know that if you're reading this book, you may think that it's too late for you to change the tenor and focus of your marriage. After all, you've been relating to each other in this way long enough to have adult children. Although a loving marriage might seem like a hopeless proposition to you right now, the Lord, who called you both together and who has made you both one, is able to revitalize and revive the love you once

had. In fact, he's in the business of taking enemies (if that's what you've become!) and making them one. His love is so powerful that he has even taken the sin that separates the lost from his adopted family and "broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace . . . [and] no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . fellow citizens . . . being joined together . . . into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:14–22).

Jesus Christ takes pleasure in making lovers out of those whose lives have been filled with hatred, suspicion, lack of interest, and boredom. Remember, if he's powerful enough to reconcile hateful rebels to a holy God, he's powerful enough to reconcile you and your spouse, no matter how many years it has been since you actually cared for each other. (See the "Resources for More Help" section for books on this topic.) In the meantime, even as you're reading this book, try to remember what first drew you to your spouse. This season of life after your kids are gone can be a wonderful time for romance. Now, with all of your history and shared experiences, your spouse can become your new best friend!

These years can also be a wonderful time for ministry together. You finally have time to serve the Lord and his church in ways you had only dreamed about. I have greatly enjoyed being able to take Caroline along with me for conferences and short-term missions trips without having to worry about kids back home. Caroline has also been able to pour herself into the lives of the younger women in our church and community, following the model in Titus 2:3–5.

We've come to realize that the term *empty nest* is misleading. When the kids leave, the nest is not empty because you are both still there. Furthermore, as your marriage relationship grows and becomes even stronger, your home can become

a very special, warm place to which your adult children will want to return for special family events and holidays. And it can be a place where they can seek refuge in times of trouble. Empty nest? Hardly.

### ***Parental Control or Friendly Influence?***

During the years when our children were yet children, we had the right and obligation to oversee every area of their lives. We determined how they were to be educated, chose their friends, and set the standard for their entertainment. We were the in-control parents, and they were to be the in-submission children. However, during this training process, the day-to-day control had to diminish, and our children were given more and more freedom to make choices and to learn from them. After all, the core of what it means to mature is the ability to make wise choices in real-life situations. Hopefully, as they taste success and failure, they gradually will learn to make responsible choices, rather than having to suddenly cope with the snares of independence and decision making when they move out.

Our relationship with our adult children changes as they age. Whether we like it or not, rather than fighting to maintain control, we should strive to change our relationship from in-control parents to respected friends.<sup>3</sup> If we want our children to mature into responsible adults, we've simply got to let them make their own choices and then learn from those decisions. We cannot (and should not) force them to follow our will—even when we know we're in the right. If a relationship of openness and mutual respect has been developed over the years, hopefully they'll seek and heed our counsel as people who know them well and have their best interests at heart.

Peacemaker Ministries<sup>4</sup> teaches the concept of having “passport” in the lives of those we are trying to influence. Just as we need a literal passport to gain the right to enter a foreign land, we need to earn the right to speak into the life of another adult (even our own child’s). Of course, in the same way that we might be able to enter a foreign land by force if we had a big enough army, we may be able to get our adult child to comply with some of our demands through threats or manipulation. In cases like this, even though we may have won a battle, we’re in danger of losing the war. Strong-arm tactics and dictatorial rule won’t engender love and respect in adult kids. It will not win the hearts and minds of those we are hoping to persuade. Instead, it will likely have the opposite effect: the adult child will simply bide his time until he has the means to escape your control, or he’ll give up in frustration and bitterness.

We gain passport with our adult child by treating him or her with love and respect. If we can patiently learn to listen rather than always demanding to be heard, as James 1:19 teaches, our child will know that we respect his opinion and his right to differ with our views. As one parent reported to us, “Our kids can have a lot of insight that can be helpful to me! I’ve learned to try to listen.”

We lose passport when we nag, manipulate, and demand control.<sup>5</sup> When experienced parents were asked to share the main lessons they had learned in dealing with their adult kids, the most common answer was learning when *not* to speak. One wrote, “The greatest challenge has been not giving my opinion about things. I often have the urge to offer advice in order to help my children keep from making mistakes or poor choices.” Another states, “The most challenging aspect in dealing with my adult children is to . . . remember that I am merely counseling. The kids don’t have to do what I tell them.”

We understand how difficult it is to learn to listen, especially when what's being said seems so immature and foolish. We can fight our impatience by remembering how willingly Jesus listens to us, and how foolish, weak, and sinful we would seem to him if it were not for his love.

### ***The Relationship Has Changed***

Most Christians agree that when children marry they establish a new, separate family unit (Gen. 2:24) and are no longer under parental authority. But what about adult kids who remain single? Some Christian teachers and seminar leaders assert that adult children are to be absolutely subordinate to their parents until they marry. In contrast, while we believe that the Bible requires single adults to honor their parents, it also teaches them to be independent and responsible for their own choices.

Our Lord Jesus clearly portrays this change in his relationship with his mother in John 2. When she mentions a lack of wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus, a young, unmarried man, replies, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4, NASB). While Jesus loved and honored his mother, he was no longer subordinate to her. And because this example comes from the life of Jesus himself, we can be sure that his relationship with her was the supreme example of what it meant to be a godly child.

The concept of a single adult being responsible and independent is also found in John 9, where we find the Jews questioning the parents of the man Jesus had healed of blindness. Although they might simply have been trying to protect themselves, the concept of an adult child's personal responsibility is clear. Although it's reasonable to assume that they knew what had happened to him and that he wasn't a

married man, instead of answering for him, they responded to the Pharisees' questions by pointing them toward their now-seeing son: "Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself" (John 9:21, NASB).

The Gospels are not the only place we see this concept. Numbers 1:3 indicates that those who were twenty years old and above were considered old enough to be numbered among the men of Israel and able to go off to war. Paul speaks of a child being "of age" in Galatians 4:1-2, explaining that an heir manages his own affairs once he is an adult and not under a guardian. Paul also describes the advantages of remaining single in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34.

One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord that she may be holy, both in body and spirit, but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. (NASB)

What is Paul teaching here? Simply that an adult may choose to remain single so that he or she may serve the Lord with undivided devotion. He does not say that the single adult must remain single to serve or please his parents, nor does he teach that a daughter must marry if that is what they wish. Paul's assumption seems to be that in their adulthood, singles are accountable directly to the Lord, which implies that they are independent of their parents, who in many cases were probably not believers. Certainly, there is no indication that Paul, though single, was subordinate to his parents. Some teachers claim that daughters are to be treated differently than sons and must remain under the absolute authority of

their parents until they are married. But Paul gives a clear example of a single woman being fully given to the things of the Lord, which would assume a certain level of independence from her parents.

The Bible even gives examples of adult children taking a stand against their parents. Jonathan rightly stood against his father Saul by making a covenant with David and loyally defending him. When the twelve spies sent out by Moses gave their reports of the Promised Land, the people received the false report of the ten unbelieving spies rather than the report of Joshua and Caleb. Numbers 32:11 recounts the Lord declaring that none of the unbelieving men who were twenty or older would enter the land. This implies that a single, twenty-year-old adult was “of age” and responsible to make his own choices in life. He could not use the excuse that he was simply following in his parents’ unbelief. Rather he had the duty to take a stand for the Lord by following Joshua and Caleb, even if this meant going against his parents who stood with the unbelieving spies.

Pastor John Piper wrote that the church must “sound the trumpet for young adults that Christ is Lord of their lives and that they are not dependent upon mom and dad for ultimate guidance.”<sup>6</sup> Or as one astute twenty-four-year-old wrote of her understanding of authority, “Parents aren’t the final arbiter of truth; God is, and it is with Him whom we all have to deal!”

### ***But Aren’t Children Commanded to Obey Their Parents?***

Some of you may be wondering about Ephesians 6:1 and the command for children to obey their parents. Doesn’t this command extend even into adulthood? Or could there be a limit implied in it? Some parents might say that this command applies to children of all ages. But in light of the passages

explained above, we believe that Paul is referring to children who are still dependent upon their parents and under their roof and authority, as opposed to those who are “of age.”<sup>7</sup> The application of the commandment to older children, even those who are married, obliges them to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12) by showing them respect and helping them when they are in need (1 Tim. 5:4). (See appendix B for more on this.) However, they are no longer obligated to submit to them or obey them in all things.

It’s a sad reality that some parents sinfully abuse their position of authority. Amelia was a woman in her early thirties who was still living with her parents and being courted by a fine Christian man. The catch was that the man’s work was thousands of miles away from Amelia’s family. Her parents refused to allow their daughter to marry this man, because they simply didn’t like the idea of their daughter moving so far away. We advised Amelia that her parents were wrongfully trying to control her (Eph. 6:4), and according to Scripture, she was free to choose whether or not to marry.

In another case, Jorge, a single man in his early forties, was living with his divorced mother who objected to his desire to marry a godly, Christian woman he had been courting. She wanted him either to continue to live with her or to marry the woman she chose. Jorge’s mother claimed that Ephesians 6:1 proved that her son would be violating Scripture to marry against her will. Jorge sought counsel from church leaders who convinced him that he was free to choose his wife. Today Jorge and his wife have a blessed marriage with dear, beautiful children. He and his wife are doing all they can to show kindness to his mother despite her opposition to their marriage.

The problem of parents refusing to let go and trying to control the choices of their adult kids is not a new one. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther’s father wanted him to be a

lawyer, but Martin was determined to be a priest. Although the conflict between father and son was painful, every Protestant can be thankful that Luther went against the desires of his father and made his own choice. God used his determination to be his own man in marvelous ways that are still resounding through the world more than five hundred years later.

Like Luther, our young adults are responsible before God to make their own choices. They are responsible to choose their vocation, marriage partner, and place of residence. When our children were young the choices available to them were limited by our preferences. But now that they are “of age,” they are free to leave our home and supervision, even if we believe that decision is foolish.

### ***We All Need So Much Grace***

Every human relationship requires grace to survive. People living in close quarters will wrong each other. Parents become impatient and nag. Children sometimes are self-centered and unappreciative. We’re tempted to think that our way is the only way. We’re convinced that we really do know best. But our adult children are convinced of the same thing—they believe that they are the ones who know what’s best. Every generation in our home is proud, selfish, and demanding. One parent reminded us, “Don’t be surprised by sin! We are all sinners.”

Yes, we’re all sinners. This is the reason that we need much grace, and the good news is that we’ve been given grace upon grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As those who have been the recipients of such astounding grace from an infinitely holy and eternally wise God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we are compelled to show grace to one another and to fight against the selfishness, fear, and demandingness that threaten to engulf our souls. We’re commanded to “be kind

to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other.” But how are we to do this? How are we to forgive those kids who have hurt us, or who are going against our wishes? There is only one source of power that will enable us to treat our adult children as we should. That power is the forgiveness and grace we’ve been given in the gospel. The end of the verse above tells us how to obey its command to love our adult kids: “just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32).

### **Let’s Think More about It**



Summarizing the main points of a chapter as soon as you’ve finished it is a good aid to help you to remember what you’ve read. You can write the answers to these questions in a journal or in the margins of the book. Either way, you’ll be able to more easily recall what you’ve learned.

1. What are some of the difficulties you’re facing with your adult kids?
2. Review the biblical foundation that we laid for saying that children who are “of age” are responsible for their own choices. What’s your response to these verses? What do you agree or disagree with?
3. If you’re married, how did the concept of the nest not really being empty strike you? How would you rate your marriage at this point? Are there concrete steps that you think you should take to make your marriage sing again? What would they be?