

“Learning to Leave Your Parents” (Relating to them as an adult.)

Introduction:

God’s goal for marriage is a bond of love between husband and wife with the subsequent formulation of a new and independent family unit the stand accountable to God.

Satan’s desire is to destroy all of God’s purposes and designs. This, coupled with the waywardness of our flesh and the corruption of the world makes the marriage unit very susceptible to disruption, decay, and divorce.

Some of the leading causes of marital strife and discord are:

- Materialism, spending & financial differences.
- Differences in belief and devotion to God.
- Child rearing differences.
- Inadequate communication and relational skills.
- Sexual tensions.
- Not appreciating or understanding personality differences.
- Lack of awareness of love styles (attachment injuries) that make bonding difficult.
- Failure to differentiate from parents which leads to extended family conflict.

It is this last point, “parent, family, and in-law conflict,” which I will be addressing within this study. While many books can be found on most of the major points, less is devoted to the issue of “leaving and cleaving” or learning to leave your parents and the gravitational field of their influence.

A key problem facing all married couples is the interference and or domination by parents or siblings upon the married couple and / or an excessive dependence by one or both of married couple upon their parents. Furthermore, as we mature and watch our children leave the nest, many of us struggle with letting our own children leave the nest and engage in adult life.

If we don’t squarely face the need to grow up and differentiate from our parents, we will never grow into a mature adult who can speak as a peer to our parents as well as tolerate their disapproval should we choose a course that differs from their choices. If we fail to individuate successfully from our parents, it will adversely affect the ability to bond with one’s spouse as well as become the family unit that God designed.

Key Biblical Text:

“Have you not read... For this cause man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.” “Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Matthew 19:5-6 & Genesis 2:24).”

The word “leave” carries the idea of “to depart or separate away from the influence of another.” The word “cleave” means to glue, weld, or bond together. Thus, Jesus Christ said that we need to leave our parents and cleave to our spouse.

This is the leaving of one family unit and the formulation of a new independent unit that is accountable to God directly (I Corinthians 11:1-3). Both young adults and their parents need to learn to let their grown children move on to this new position before God.

The new relationship to parent then becomes an elective choice as an adult peer...learning to relate at the same level, with independence emotionally, spiritually, and physically. If there is still a strong emotional dependency on either side, then there will be unhealthy dependence and discord as well as a failure to reach one’s highest potential as a human being as well as a servant of God.

As we address this area, then let each of us ask these questions:

1. Have I learned to leave my parents and cleave to my spouse?
2. Do I have a healthy adult relationship with my parents and family?
3. Have I let go of my grown children?

In our study we will see that learning to “leave” our parents as well as “cleave” to our spouses is both seen in the life of Christ with his own family as well as His teaching about family in His adult ministry.

JESUS’ CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND LEAVING OF HIS OWN FAMILY:

Luke 2:39-51-52: Much of Jesus’ childhood is not known due to the fact that scripture does not expand upon that time of His life. This passage however, deals with the child Jesus at the age of twelve in an incident that describes the embryonic stages of His leaving of His own family to pursue His independent adult ministry and mission.

He separates from his family’s travel caravan and stays in Jerusalem in the temple to discuss theology with the religious leaders. Upon finally being discovered by a worried mother and father, he was rebuked for a three day delay as well as worry on the parent’s part. Jesus remarks, “Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Father’s house?”

Here we see a sense of “destiny” in the young boy. His statement, which implies a physical, emotional, and spiritual involvement in the affairs of His Heavenly Father, intimated that His heavenly priorities superseded His earthly ones. At that moment, His own family’s physical, and emotional comfort, and family structure was disrupted or set aside for the purpose of heavenly calling.

The balance of Christ’s development until age thirty, is obscure and the only insight we have is that “Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

Matt 3:13-17(cf. Luke 3:21-22): At the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist as a grown adult, we see the pivot point in His life with respect to His breaking away from His family for the purpose of independent adult ministry. At his baptism, the Heavenly Father speaks from

heaven as the Holy Spirit comes upon Him and says, "Thou art my beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased." From this point on, Jesus carries Himself as a grown adult who then relates to His family on a voluntary basis on an adult level as a peer, not as a grown child who is bound to the family infrastructure of the preceding thirty years.

Luke 4:1-13 (cf. Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13): After his baptism, He was compelled to go into the wilderness for forty days for the purpose of suffering, facing temptation, and fighting the forces of Satan. This was a solo event without the aid or support of the family. He learned a healthy "independent dependency" upon God, which in fact could not have been learned with the interferences from family member's actions, feelings, or opinions. Thus, we see the evolution of the healthy movement away from family influence, taking place in the life of Christ for the sake of godly personal growth.

John 2:1-11: At the wedding at Cana, we see this "new" adult Jesus for the first time again with His family. We see a different way of relating to His mother than he had probably related in the past. When the host ran out of wine, Jesus' mother approached Him and said, "They have no wine," Jesus responded, "Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come." Mary, trying to help out her friends in a uncomfortable situation, goes to her oldest Son (Joseph is probably dead at this time) to ask for help for the Wedding Host. She puts the mundane, yet important problem before Jesus, with the expectation that He would do something for her upon her request. He ultimately does comply with her desires, yet it is not done until he establishes two very important conditions. First, He made it clear that He was an independent adult in his reference to her as "woman," which was a term that an adult male would employ toward any other woman whom he might address (cf. John 4:21).

Secondly, he made it clear that He was dedicated to a separate and distinct "life agenda" than His mother as evidenced by his comment, "What do I have to do with you, My hour has not yet come." This phrase "My hour" refers to the pinnacle of His earthly ministry upon which he had just previously embarked, as which point he would accomplish God's divine redemptive plan for all of mankind. He was making it clear that nothing was going to dissuade Him from the urgency and primacy of "that" task, even at the expense of an embarrassed wedding host. Once establishing these two basic conditions, He then voluntarily complies with Her request and performs His first miracle.

John 2:12-17: In this passage, Jesus is still traveling, associating and living with His family for a few days. It is interesting to note that He also has His own disciples along with Him, which would indicate that He thus viewed Himself clearly as a Rabbi/ Teacher. Historically, these Rabbis would have bands of followers who would trail them wherever they would go. Evidently, not only He viewed himself as their teacher, but they did also. This band of followers we shall note later becomes a point of taunting for His unbelieving and unsupportive brothers.

After the presumed rest and visit with His family, He and His disciples went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. While it is quite possible that He could have traveled with His family over the seventy mile distance, in that it was common for people to travel in large caravans, it become quite clear that He was pursuing His own agenda (Father and Spirit inspired) when He walked into the Temple area. With no thought of His earthly family's

opinion or approval, He “cleanses the temple” by making a scourge of leather thongs and driving out moneychangers along with all of the animals. “Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a house of merchandise.” The text goes on to comment that His disciples remembered the Old Testament prophecy “Zeal for Thy House will consume Me.”

After voluntarily “associating” with His family on His terms, He abruptly differentiates and individuates from them to return to His divine adult agenda and purpose for living to which God had called Him.

John 7:1-9: Having returned back to Galilee, due to death threats in Jerusalem, another feast was coming up, which would require the attendance the devout Jew in Jerusalem. It was the feast of Booths, which was a commemoration of the provision of God as they remembered their ancestors living in tents in the wilderness for forty years. Realizing the conflict that the threat of death and required attendance would evoke, Jesus’ unbelieving and unsupportive brothers seized the opportunity and began to taunt and heckle their sibling. The text reads as follows:

“His brothers therefore said to Him, ‘Depart from here, and go into Judea that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ For not even His brothers were believing in Him. Jesus therefore said to them, ‘My time is not yet at hand; but your time is always opportune. The world cannot hate you; but it hates Me, because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil. Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go to this feast because My time has not yet fully come.’ And having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee. But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up. Not publicly, but as it were, in secret.”

Thus, “sibling rivalry” was even present in the life of Jesus by His brothers. Here we see several interesting points in the development of Jesus “leaving” of His family. First, He was willing to confront His brothers in a rather abrupt and yet truthful way. He was willing to “speak truth, each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another (Ephesians 4:25).” The second thing we note is that He was willing to separate and thus initiated distance between Himself and His brothers for the purpose of fulfilling His own plans and divinely inspired calendar. Lastly, it is significant to observe that He was willing to break coveted “family tradition” by not traveling with the family caravan, and subsequently traveling without family under secret cover.

We can clearly see then, that Jesus remained undaunted with respect to approval, acceptance, and family harmony, when it came to purposes, which He knew God wanted Him to accomplish. The powerful *will of the family*, which we all find so hard to resist, did not prevail in the life of Christ. He did not waver and determined that family pressure would not be allowed to supersede divine goals.

Practically speaking however, and in defense of the brothers and sisters, how would you like to have your brother stand up in a crowd and say, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.” Eventually they all came around, yet at the beginning of Jesus public ministry, they were skeptics as I am sure we all might be.

Matthew 12:46-50 see also Matt 13:1, John 3:31-36, Luke 8:19-21: In these passages, Jesus indicated that His family identity was with his followers, and not with His family of origin. It appears that they were trying to get His attention or call Him away from His ministry responsibilities. He never did come to them at their request when it interfered with His plans and purposes. He said that His followers were His new family (Mother, brothers and sisters).

John 17: In the High Priestly Prayer of Christ, Jesus said to the Father, that He had accomplished or finished the “work” that the Father had given Him to accomplish in His public ministry on earth. He could not have accomplished this work, had His life’s actions and agenda been dictated by family harmony and approval.

Luke 22: The night before He was crucified and died at the Passover meal (The Last Supper), He was not with His mother, brothers and sisters sorrowfully saying His goodbyes. Rather, He is with His twelve disciples, the new group of Church leaders (except Judas) who would become Apostles who would lead the church in His absence, establish verbal authority by attesting miracles and ultimately pen the New Testament under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

John 19:25-27 Jesus does not abandon His true responsibility to His family as He tenderly cares for His mother’s future provision as He hung of the cross. In this encounter, He tells Mary that John shall be her son (provider) and that she shall be his mother. True maturity and adult independence never negates God given “commands” or “directives.” As we shall see in a later section, the Christian does have a responsibility to provide and care for aging parents. It is interesting to note that although Jesus’ brothers and sisters were still alive, His trust and deep friendship with the Apostle John moved Him to ask John to care for His mother after He died.

Acts 1:14: Ultimately at the end of His life, we see Jesus’ mother Mary, brothers and sisters (presumably) becoming believers and viewed Him as Israel’s long awaited Savior and Messiah who died for their sins and provided eternal salvation to them. We note that many of them were involved in the early church and the finished work of Christ on the cross, could only have been accomplished because they as His family of origin were forced to accommodate to Christ’s life goals and not He to theirs.

What do we learn from the example of Jesus Christ with respect to Him differentiating and individuating from His family of origin?

- While Jesus remained unmarried as an adult and didn’t “leave and cleave” to a spouse per se, He did leave his family of origin to become an independent, mature adult.
- He was free from the gravitational field of His family as to be able to pursue His own life’s goals and ministry.

- Yet, he also voluntarily associated with His Mother, brothers and sisters (Matthew 13:56, Mark 6:3) for the purpose of fulfilling family responsibility and fellowship as He desired or determined as necessary.
- His adult ministry was driven by a divine destiny and intimate relationship with His Heavenly Father as they (along with the Holy Spirit) carried out the Kingdom plan that was determined before the foundation of the world and revealed through the Old Testament prophets.

JESUS' AND THE APOSTLE PAUL'S TEACHING ABOUT LEAVING THE "AUTHORITY" OF THE FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND THE CREATION OF A NEW FAMILY UNIT:

Matthew 10:35-37: Jesus taught that the costs of following Him might mean separation, hostility and estrangement from one's own closest family members.

Mark 3:20-35: As Jesus returned and spoke in his hometown; religious leaders from Jerusalem traveled there to accuse and challenge Jesus and even insist that He was possessed by a demon. What was His family of origin's response to all of this? "And when His own people (kinsmen) heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, 'He has lost His senses (v.21).'"

Mark 6:1-6: The people in His hometown synagogue were astonished at His teaching and resisted His ministry. Because of his family's familiarity, they did not believe Him but challenged His authority. It was at this point that the now famous and familiar words were first spoken, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own home town and among his own relatives and in his own household (v.4)."

Matthew 19:1-6, Mark 10:17, Ephesians 4:22-32, and I Corinthians 11:3: These passages all speak of the leaving and cleaving and the formulation of the new family unit that stands accountable only to God and not to the mother and father that raised you. The parent is no longer viewed in the authoritative role of "headship" or leadership. The parent no longer must be obeyed and their authority honored as was true when the person was a child under their care growing up.

Matthew 15:1-9, John 19:25-27, and Timothy 5:3-8: These scriptures teach that Christians have a responsibility to care for their parents' wellbeing and provision, as they grow older.

THE UNHEALTHY FAMILY OF ORIGIN AWARDS:

"The Dominating Mother Award" goes to the obnoxious mother of the soon to become Apostles James and John. You know, **John** who wrote John, 1, 2 and 3 John, and the Book of Revelation? Yes that John. Well... while he and his brother were full fledged men... whose nick names were "Sons of Thunder" (lot's of male bravado here), ... well their mommy you know... right in front of all the other disciples... marched up to Jesus and said (whined is more like it) "When your kingdom comes, can my boys sit in the two highest positions with one to your left and one to your right?" Gag me! Where is the airsickness

bag when you need one? (Mrs. Thunder couldn't be here tonight to receive her award.) For the full story, read Matthew 20: 20-28.

“The Enmeshed Mother and Adult Daughter Award” goes to Herodias the woman who left her own husband (Herod's brother) to have an adulterous affair with slightly higher ranking man... King Herod. When John the Baptist confronted the unrighteousness of this public spectacle, Herod had John thrown in prison. When the adult daughter seductively danced in front of the king and her mom (a really sick thing to do), the king lost his head and offered her anything in his kingdom up to one half of the kingdom's value. Wow. What a dance! Where did she learn such moves? While the panting crowd waited for her answer, her mom whispered in her ear, “The head of John the Baptist, delivered now on a platter.” The sick, pathetic, overly dependent adult child (who was still a little girl inside) made her request and although the king regretted his offer, he gave the order and a moment later, John the Baptist was dead, the head delivered. (We actually had a family member who had a sculpture of the nude girl gazing into the face of the beheaded John on the platter. More sick!)

“The Most Unhealthy Family in the Old Testament Award” goes to Isaac and Rebekah. They had two sons Jacob and Esau. Jacob married Rachel and Leah while Esau married the daughters of Heth. This unhealthy family system was strewn with deception, conflict, favoritism, lying and scheming. What a mess. God was not pleased, yet because of God's previous promises to Abraham about the future family descendent, Jesus the Messiah. God was faithful anyway to allow this family to produce the twelve tribes of Israel, one of which would be Judah, the family of Jesus the Messiah. Genesis 25:27-28, 26:1-45, 27:1-46.

PERSONAL APPLICATIONS, PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Reminder: Learning to leave your parents and helping them to learn to leave you can be quite challenging. Quite often one or both sides will refuse to accept the revealed will of God to allow for adult separation and independence.

Question: What could be some of the reasons why one or both sides do not allow this change to take place?

Reminder: We must learn to relate to our parents as a peer, as an adult son or daughter, NOT as a grown child with dependencies and needs emotionally, physically, or spiritually. If need be, as we get a handle on this, we may need to help our parents learn to relate to us as an adult son or daughter, not as a grown child. They may still be having some of their own mothering or fathering “needs” being met in your relationship to this day.

Question: What might be the difference between an adult son or daughter versus a grown child?

Question: What steps can we take to alter our perspectives and bring about appropriate changes within our lives?

Question: As we begin to get a handle on implementing these steps, what ways can we help a noncompliant parent detach from us?

Reminder: My relationship with my parents becomes “elective” rather than “duty” because the parental authority requests or demands it. My bond and allegiance turns toward my spouse... “united we stand...divided we fall.” If we do not leave our parents and bond to our spouse, serious challenges will arise which will affect our marriage, parenting, life development and our destiny in service for the Lord.

Reminder: If I am still attached to a parent in an unhealthy manner as an adult, I am inadvertently passing along a life lesson to my children that they may emulate. Much of the time, family systems perpetuate and propagate unhealthiness from generation to generation.

As an adult, I need to look back at my childhood as well as their childhood and attempt to understand my parent’s positive skills as well as their attachment injuries that affected my upbringing. I need to view my family of origin accurately, not for the purpose of parent bashing, but rather to assess how I may have been positively or negatively affected in my preparation for adulthood and adult relationships.

If I am to become a successful parent, I must successfully navigate the experience of leaving and cleaving from my own family of origin so that I can prepare myself and my children to successfully leave me as their parent when it is their time. I cannot teach or model what I have not learned myself.

For the first time in 35 years, Kay and I are now empty nesters. Our home is much quieter and cleaner than when all six of us were all here. Sad? Yes, to some degree. Yet, we now have four new adult friends as well as spouses that we enjoy immensely.

Question: Why is it so hard to look “objectively” at our past as well as our parent’s performance as parents? How might one go about doing this?

Question: How is marriage harmed when there is a failure to “leave” parents?

Question: What could be some positive “elective” versus “obligatory” relational goals toward your parents?

Question: If you are still very dependent upon one or both of your parents, talk about the emotion of *fear* that keeps you there.

Have you left your parents?

Have they left you?