

# You Never Stop Being a Parent

Thriving in Relationship with  
Your Adult Children

Jim Newheiser and Elyse Fitzpatrick

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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# 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.

## IS IT THAT TIME ALREADY?

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

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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

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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?