

Learning to Leave Your Parents

(Relating to Them as an Adult)

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Introduction:

God's goal for marriage is a bond of love between husband and wife with the subsequent formulation of a new family unit that is independent from parents and is accountable directly to God and His authority. The same is true for adults who are single like the Apostle Paul and Jesus. This article is a guide to you as an adult son or daughter or as the parent of adult sons or daughters as you seek to understand more fully God's design for the family as it progresses from generation to generation.

Satan's desire is to destroy all of God's purposes and designs. Marriage is one of his prime targets. Within the subject of marriage, one of the most overlooked challenges for a new bride and groom is the *failure to differentiate* from parents. Failure to do so will become a major stressor to the new adult relationship as husband and wife. This brief study will be devoted to the Biblical theme 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 spouses 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 fail to grow up and differentiate from our parents, we will never grow into mature adults 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.

Key Biblical Text:

"Have you not read... For this cause a 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" is defined as "departing or separating 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; i.e., the leaving of one family unit and the formulation of a new independent unit that is accountable to God directly (1 Corinthians 11:1-3). Both young adults and their parents need to learn to let their grown sons and daughters 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 and as a servant of God.



We each need to ask ourselves the following 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. Do my parents have an unhealthy dependence upon me?
4. Am I preparing to let my children go?
5. Have I let go of my grown sons and daughters?

In our study, we will see that learning to “leave” our parents as well as “cleave” to our spouse 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 because 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 beginning to leave 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 His parents’ 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 were disrupted or set aside for the purpose of a 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.”

Matthew 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 and 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. Matthew 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 members’ 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 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 her friends in an uncomfortable situation, goes to her oldest son (Joseph is probably dead currently) 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 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, at 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. Not only did *He* view 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 became 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 money changers along with all 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 to Galilee, due to death threats in Jerusalem, another feast was coming up, which would require the attendance of 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 an abrupt 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 that Jesus remained undaunted with respect to approval, acceptance, and family harmony when it came to the *purposes* 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 Matthew 13:1, John 3:31-36, Luke 8:19-21): In these passages, Jesus indicated that His family identity was with His followers—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 family harmony and approval dictated His life’s actions and agenda.

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 was 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 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 on 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 negate 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: At the end of His life, we see Jesus’ mother Mary, brothers, and sisters (presumably) becoming believers and viewing 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—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 did not “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 to be able to pursue His own life’s goals and ministry.
- Yet, He also voluntarily associated with His mother, brothers, and sisters as necessary (Matthew 13:56, Mark 6:3) for the purpose of fulfilling family responsibility and fellowship as He desired or determined.
- His adult ministry was driven by a divine destiny and intimate relationship with His Heavenly Father as they and 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 and they 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 hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household."(v.4)


Matthew 19:1-6, Mark 10:17, Ephesians 4:22-32, and 1 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 1 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 mother of the soon to become Apostles James and John, the sons of Zebedee. While they were full-fledged adult men whose nicknames were "Sons of Thunder" (lots of male bravado here) Ms. Zebedee/Ms. Thunder (take your pick) marched up to Jesus and said, "When your kingdom comes, can my boys sit in the two highest positions with one to your left and one to your right?"

Are you kidding me? As a student athlete, I've been in a lot of locker rooms, and do you know the razzing someone would get if their mom pulled a stunt like that? Ten other disciples and perhaps others watched the whole thing happen in front of Jesus. Anger, resentment, and smirk! James and John had to have been mortified. How'd they let it get this far? All they had to say was "Mom, we're grown adults, we can represent ourselves!" Or "Mom, we'll never live this down!" Why couldn't they say these things? Because there was a *collective failure of nerve!* Perhaps their father Mr. Zebedee/Mr. Thunder couldn't say no to Mutha Thunda, so how could they? Jesus politely said, "This is a choice my Father makes." (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 a 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, 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 and I’m sure alcohol was involved. While the expectant king and guests waited for her answer, her mom whispered in her ear, “The head of John the Baptist, delivered *now* on a platter.” The 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. A moment later, John the Baptist was dead, and his head was delivered. Kay and I had a family member with a sculpture of the nude girl gazing into the face of the beheaded John on the platter. It was revolting.

“The Unhealthiest 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 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:

- 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.
- 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. Sometimes we need to help our parents learn to relate to us as adult sons or daughters, not as grown children.
- My relationship with my parents becomes “elective” rather than “duty” because the parental authority requests or demands it. My bond and allegiance are with 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.
- 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.

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- 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 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 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.

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEMPLATION AND DISCUSSION:

- What could be some of the reasons why one or both sides do not allow this change to take place?
- What might be the difference between an adult son or daughter versus a grown child?
- What steps can we take to alter our perspectives and bring about appropriate changes within our married lives and parental relationships?
- As we begin to get a handle on implementing these steps, what ways can we help a non-compliant parent detach from us?
- Why is it so hard to look “objectively” at our own past as well as to be able to assess our mom and dad's performance as parents?
- How is a marriage harmed when there is a failure to “leave” parents?
- What could be some positive “elective” versus “obligatory” relational goals toward your parents?
- If you are still very dependent upon one or both of your parents, talk about the emotion of *fear* that keeps you there.

Kay and I are now empty nesters, and our home is much quieter and cleaner than when all six of us were living in the same house. Sad? Yes, to some degree. Yet, we now have four new adult friends as well as their spouses and grandchildren whom we enjoy immensely. May the Lord bless your journey of adulting.

Blessings,
Milan and Kay Yerkovich

About the Authors:

For years, unseen forces governed the ways we loved each other, and we didn't recognize the painful patterns we were stuck in until we revisited our first lessons in love from our families. For the first time, we understood the source of our frustrations and knew there was hope for deep and lasting change in our marriage.

Since then, we have worked towards a more secure bond with each other, developed new patterns of engaging, and rebuilt a flourishing marriage. Our prayer is that you will soon discover what we have: the relief that comes from working towards resolution, experiencing deep understanding, and knowing comfort.

Married in 1972, Milan and Kay have four children. When they aren't writing and speaking, they enjoy their 10 grandchildren. Milan and Kay enjoy speaking together and have co-authored two books, *How We Love*, (2006 and Expanded Version, 2018), and *How We Love Our Kids* (2011).

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