

Jesus' Family and Ours

Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.

Columbia Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Text: Luke 2:41-52

This text is one of the few in the Gospels that tell us anything about Jesus' family life, and the only one that tells us anything about Jesus' childhood and adolescence. I have chosen to call your attention to it because I believe that it has something to teach us about the true meaning and purpose of family life in our time. But we must be very careful not to try to make a direct move from Jesus' family to our families.

In the first place, the story tells us about an event in the life of a family in an ancient culture very different from ours—a culture and a kind of family life very few of us would seriously like to go back to even if we could (especially those of us who are women or who care about the status of women).

Moreover, even in that ancient culture Luke did not tell us the story primarily to give his readers pious advice about how parents should raise their children and how children should behave in relation to their parents. He records this event along with the birth narrative to tell us that the Jesus whose story he is telling is not only the son of earthly parents but the Son of God.

And that above all makes it dangerous for us to move from Mary and Joseph and Jesus to papa and mama and Bill or Betty in our time. As proud as we may be of our children, they are not little Jesuses. And as important as we Christians may be, *our* parents did not give birth to little Jesuses either. Unlike Jesus, none of us is called to be the Judge, Reconciler, Savior and Lord of the world. That job has already been taken. Just like everyone else, we Christians are plain old human beings who *are* judged, need to *be* reconciled and helped, by one who is far greater, far wiser, far more loving and caring, far more able to help than any of us can ever hope to be.

None of us is Joseph and Mary, and the worst thing we could do in relationship to our children is to worship and serve them as if they were little Emmanuels, little gods-with-us.

None of us is permitted the arrogant pretension, or required to bear the terrible burden, of confusing ourselves with Jesus. And the worst thing we could do to our families and other people is to act as if we were God-in-the-flesh in relation to them.

Nevertheless, if we have a clear understanding of the great difference between the "holy family" and our all too unholy families, I believe that we can learn something from the story of the boy Jesus and his parents about our proper roles as children and parents.

The Story

First let us listen to the story itself.

Along with their kinfolks and neighbors in the village of Nazareth, Mary and Joseph go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They take the twelve-year-old Jesus with them. As faithful Jews they have taught him the traditions of Israel and its God-given laws (including, by the way, the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother"). Now Jesus is old enough to make his bar mitzvah, and they take him with them so that he can begin to experience the privileges and responsibilities that lie ahead of him as an adult member of the community of Israel. After the celebration is over, the Nazareth crowd starts for home. They travel a whole day before Joseph and Mary realize that Jesus is not with the group as they had assumed.

Luke doesn't tell us how they felt when they discovered that Jesus is missing, but he doesn't have to. However different the culture, ancient parents were enough like modern ones that we know exactly what they felt.

First comes panic. He must be scared to death wandering around all by himself, lost and hungry and cold in the big city. Or maybe it's worse than that. Maybe he's been kidnapped. Maybe he's been hurt. Maybe he's already lying in a gutter dead. Panic.

Then comes anger. Why did he do this to us? Didn't he know how worried we would be? Didn't he realize how much trouble he would cause us, making us turn around and go back to look for him? If Joseph was an old-fashioned parent, he says, "Just wait till I get my hands on that kid. I'll beat the tar out of him." Or if he was a modern parent, he says, "I'm going to make it clear to him in no uncertain terms that his behavior was very inappropriate. He's old enough to know he shouldn't do anything so irresponsible." Anger.

Then comes guilt. Why didn't we take better care of him. After all, he's just a child. How could we have left without checking to be sure that he was with his uncle and aunt and cousins? Where did we fail in our efforts to raise him to respect us and care about our feelings? If he's hurt or dead, it's really our own fault.

So it goes all the long hours back to Jerusalem: sheer panic, seething anger, gut-wrenching guilt. Then panic again.

They arrive in Jerusalem and the search begins. Three long days they look for him. They buttonhole strangers on the street: "Have you seen a sweet, blue-eyed, Gentile-looking boy with long blond hair, dressed in a shiny white robe, with a halo over his head?" They check all the first century video game rooms, fast food places, toy stores—everywhere a twelve-year-old boy might hang out. Nothing.

Then finally they find him. In church, of all places. First they breathe a sigh of relief. He's safe! Then the anger comes back full force, mitigated only by the fact that at least he's not acting like a smart aleck and showing off. He's sitting there among the teachers and elders like a well-trained Jewish boy, just listening and asking questions.

The mother takes over, not the father. Joseph, the strong male boss of the family is silent, and in fact plays no role in the whole story except perhaps to handle the details of travel arrangements.

Mary hugs and kisses Jesus, then starts in with a rush of mother talk: "Son, we've been worried sick about you. We haven't slept a wink for four days. How could you do this to us . . . after all we've done for you? What will everyone say about us when they hear how you have treated your own mother and father? What do you think *God* is thinking about you right now?" And on and on.

Then Jesus answers. But he does not say what we would have expected from an adolescent: "Well, I looked all over for you, but when I couldn't find you, I decided to come here and wait for you." Or "I just needed some time to be by myself for a while." Or even "Get off my back. I have to do my own thing." Difficult as it is to deal with adolescents, Mary and Joseph—or Mary, anyway—could have blundered their way through such typical excuses.

But neither of them knows what to do with the sharp, simple answer they do get from Jesus: "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I have to be about my Father's business?"

The conversation breaks off abruptly. Not even Mary has anything to say. Luke tells us that they simply do not understand him. It's bad enough that a twelve-year-old boy starts talking theology at a time like this. Even worse, the theology itself confuses them. Jesus does what no pious Jew of his time would ever dream of doing: He calls Yahweh, the God of Israel and Master of the universe, "my Father." Not only that, he claims to have such an intimate relationship and unquestionable obligation to this heavenly Father that he seems simply to deny his relationship and obligation to his earthly parents. Their faith had taught them, and they had taught him, that to love and obey God *is* to love and obey one's parents. But now he seems to present them with the harsh alternative of loving and obeying parents *or* loving and obeying God. They stand in silent bewilderment before this strange boy and his strange theology.

But then Luke pulls a surprising switch on us. They go back to Nazareth and Jesus again acts like an ordinary boy growing up in an ordinary Jewish home. "He was *obedient* to them," Luke reports. No longer the rebellious boy theologian with a heretical theology that pushes his parents aside, now he is a normal boy who grows up and matures with willing respect for the guidance and authority of his parents. Like any other child of godly parents, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."

Honor Your Father and Your Mother

Now what should we make of this confusing story in which Jesus first seems to call into serious question our responsibility to obey God's command that we honor our fathers and our mothers, then suddenly turns around and sets for us an example of our responsibility to obey it?

Well, the most obvious interpretation of the story goes like this: As a child growing up at home, Jesus honored and obeyed his father and mother. But when he began to mature, he had to choose between his responsibility to his earthly parents and his responsibility to his heavenly Father. And given that choice, he could only forget them, no matter how much anguish it caused them,

to serve God.

That would mean that Mary and Joseph were right in insisting that Jesus should honor and obey them when he was a child, but that they should not have complained when he reached the point where he had to go his own way and leave them behind.

"Honor your father and your mother," in other words is good for children but not for adults, and parents ought to accept the fact that as their children grow up, they themselves become increasingly irrelevant, dispensable and in the way.

A lot of us might be happy with that interpretation when we think of our parents, but less happy when we think of our children!

But there is another, and I think better, interpretation of the story:

As in general Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the law, so that is what he did with regard to the fifth commandment. He not only honored his father and mother as a child at home in Nazareth; he honored them also as an adolescent in Jerusalem. After all, it was they who had taught him to love and obey God above everyone else, and to put loyalty to God above every other loyalty. They themselves had taught him not only the fifth commandment but the first as well: "You shall have no other gods before me"—not even your parents. Precisely in staying behind in the temple, Jesus showed that he had taken their parental guidance and authority very seriously. He goes his own way, but that does not mean he has forgotten and rejected them; on the contrary, it means that he honors them by going just the way they themselves had taught him.

So Mary and Joseph were better parents than they realized. Jesus left them and stayed in the temple just because they had so successfully taught him what the most important things are, which way he should go, what he had to do with his life.

In other words, "Honor your father and your mother" applies both to children *and* to adults, but in a different way. *Children* honor their parents by obeying them and following their directions without question. *Growing and grown children* honor their parents by going the way their parents have taught them—even when that sometimes means disappointing their parents' immediate expectations, going against their will, refusing to fulfill their wishes, declaring their independence from parental authority.

And *successful parenting* is parenting that encourages and enables children to grow up to honor their parents just by freely and independently going their own way along the path on which their parents have set them—even if it displeases or disappoints them when their children take their own teaching and example seriously.

I Must Be About My Father's Business

That does not mean, of course, that independence or self-determination in itself and as such is the goal of good parenting and the sign that children have honored their parents. Mary and Joseph did not lead Jesus to the point where he was free to do anything he chose, but to the point where he was free to say,

"I must be about my Father's business." And Jesus honored them and proved that they had been good parents not by going a self-chosen way but by going *God's* way—or rather by his free decision to make *God's* way to *be* his way.

What does that mean for us?

Well, the same Jesus who had the unique right to call God *my* Father invited his followers to call God *our* Father. So we too are called to honor our parents not by doing anything we please with our lives but by setting out to do the business of the God who is not only his Father but our Father too—the God who is in fact the God and Father of *all* human beings.

And what would it mean for parents and children, children and parents, to believe that, like Jesus, we too must be about our Father's business?

Well, it would mean that parents would teach their children, and children would learn from their parents, that God is not just the God and Father of me and my family, but the God and Father of all other families too, a God who loves and cares for all those people outside our little family circle as much as for us, who wills their welfare and happiness just as much as ours.

It would mean making it the business of our family as it is *God's* business to respect the value and dignity of every human life—including, of course, the value and dignity of each of us in our particular family, but also the value and dignity of the life of all other people as well: people like us and people different from us, people of our own race and social class and religion and people of other races and classes and religions, people who are the friends and people who are the enemies of "our people" and our nation. It would mean respecting and defending and protecting the value and dignity of *all* human life.

And that would mean that parents would teach their children, and children would learn from their parents, that their own happiness, success and security and that of their family cannot be separated from—in fact is inseparably tied to—the cause of God's justice, order, freedom and peace in the world *outside* our home.

If we set out on that way, then, parents and children alike, we would discover that truly to honor our fathers and mothers is indeed to assert our freedom—freedom *from* the domination of both their and our own self-centered desires, wishes, demands and need to be in control; freedom *for* God's business in our own lives and in the world, and therefore freedom for all our fellow human beings and also for the realization of our own true humanity.

And at the same time we would discover that asserting our freedom—freedom to be about God's business in the world—does not undermine but is the highest and best expression of obedience to God's command to honor our fathers and our mothers.

Honor your father and your mother—therefore be about our Father's business. Be about our Father's business—and just in this way honor your father and mother and show what good parents they have been.