

Benjamin Wadsworth on the duties of children to their parents

WITH COMMENTARY BY L. MAREN WOOD

Benjamin Wadsworth, 1670–1737. *The well-ordered family: or, Relative duties. Being the substance of several sermons, about family prayer. Duties of husbands & wives. Duties of parents & children. Duties of masters & servants.* Boston, 1712.

As you read...

Benjamin Wadsworth was a Puritan minister who lived in Boston during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. He published a number of his sermons throughout his life time.

This is an excerpt taken from one of his books. In this book he discusses the different roles of family members. He gives advice to married couples, to parents, to children, and to servants.

Although there were not a lot of Puritans in eighteenth-century North Carolina, Wadsworth's advice would have been typical of the advice ministers across Colonial North America would have given children. People believed that society was a hierarchy, and society functioned best if everyone remembered his or her place and showed proper respect to authority figures. This idea of society was modeled in the home.

Wadsworth used a lot of scriptural references in his essay. People in colonial America would have been very familiar with the Bible, as it was one of the few books that were readily available.

[Love]

Parents & Children should love mutually, love one another; if they don't, they're without natural affections, which is mention'd among the worst crimes of Heathens and hypocrites. If Children duly consider, they'll find they have abundant case to love their Parents, they are very base^t & vile if they neglect it. Unless they love their Parents, they can't do other duties which they owe to them, as they should.

[Fear]

Children should fear ² their Parents. Lev. 19: 3.³ “Ye shall fear every man his Mother and his Father.”⁴ God requires that every person should fear his Parents, not only his Father, but also his Mother. Yea the Mother is here mention’d first, possibly because Persons are more apt to disregard their Mothers, tho’ they stand in some awe of their Fathers. But children should fear both, fear to offend, grieve, disobey, or displease either of them. The great God of Heaven, bids children fear their Parents; if therefore they fear them not, they rebel against God.

[Reverence and Honour]

Children should Reverence and Honour their Parents. This is one of those commands,⁵ which the great God uttered immediately with his own mouth. Our Saviour repeats this precept. Matt 15:4.⁶ And so does the Apostle,⁷ Eph 6:2.⁸ They should in their words put respect and honour on their Parents; by no means speak rudely or saucily to them.

They should by way of respect acknowledge the relation between them and their Parents as Isaac ⁹ did, “My Father,” Gen. 22: 7¹⁰. And Solomon¹¹ said, “My Mother,” 1 King 2:20¹². They did not disown their Parents, they did not scornfully call them the Old Man or the Old Woman, but respectfully said, My Father, My Mother. ...

Children should not only in Words but also in bodily Gesture, put honour on their Parents.¹³ The children of the virtuous woman rise up¹⁴ and call her blessed, Prov. 31: 28.¹⁵ They rose up, showing reverence therein and called her blessed, they spoke respectfully and thankfully to her. ...

And woe to them that despise, condemn or abuse their parents. He that smiteth Father or Mother shall surly be put to death; Exod 20:15.¹⁶ Twas not death, a capital crime,¹⁷ merely to smite another person, but God’s law made it a capital crime for any to smite Father or Mother. Prov. 30: 17.¹⁸ “The eye that mocketh at his Father or despiseth to obey his Mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.” That is, such an one shall come to a shameful and untimely death; die so shamefully as that the birds of prey should feast upon him.¹⁹ Children therefore should take heed that they don’t dare to mock at parents, or despise to obey them. ...

If parents are grown Old, Crazy,²⁰ infirm, sickly; able to do little or no business, and need much tendance; if they’re weak or shatter’d in the abilities of their minds;²¹ nay if they’re chargeable with evident Sinful failings & infirmities; yet children should not despise them, but honour them still. Tho’ Children should hate the sins,²² yet they should love & honour parents. Noah’s drunkness was a great sin in him, yet twas base for his son to mock or jeer at him (as Ham probably did)²³ and twas commendable in Shem and Zaphet, to cover and hide as far as lawfully they could, what might expose their Father to further shame or contempt, Gen. 9:21-25²⁴. Oh it is a very great and dangerous crime, for children to despise or disrespect their parents.

[Be corrected by, and take advice from, their parents]

Children should patiently bear, and grow better by, the needful chastisements and corrections their parents give them. Heb. 12. 9.²⁵ “We had Fathers of our flesh which corrected us and we gave them Reverence.” Children should reverence their Parents, in patiently bearing and deserv’d corrections, and in growing more dutiful and obedient thereby. They should not be proud, stout²⁶, stubborn, refractory, refusing the corrections their Parents would justly give them, or refusing to be mended and reformed thereby.

[Obedient]

Children should be faithful and obedient to their parents. They should be faithful to their interests, and not wrong them in their estate. It may be some children are apt to think that what’s their Fathers is theirs, and so will make bold to take almost what they please of their Father’s estates, without their Father’s leave;²⁷ and will spend, give or game away²⁸ the same as they lift. But those who are thus free with their parent’s estates, thus waste and diminish them without their parents leave; they sin greatly. ... Well then, let Children be true and faithful to their Parents, not defrauding or wronging of them at all in their estates what their parents give them they should be thankful for, but they should not take what’s their parents, without their knowledge and good liking.

Children should obey their parents in all lawful things. Children, if you find your hearts ready to rise, and rebel against your parents, then read these plain commands of God now mention’d, wherein your Maker requires you to obey your parents. In this very case (as well as in a thousand more) endeavor to impress an awful sense of God’s authority on your consciousness. When you disobey the lawful commands of your parents, you disobey God himself.

... Oh Children, consider those things, they are not light or small matters; lay them seriously to heart. It may be your Parents bid you go to work, bid you do these or those things; but you won’t, you disregard what they say. It may be you idle away your time, you’d be abroad very late on nights, very unseasonably;²⁹ you’ll get into ill company, frequent Taverns, take to Gaming and other ill practices, and all this quite contrary to the plain commands of your Parents, is it so? If it is, then you disobey and rebel against God himself. Tis no small evil you’re guilty of; you greatly provoke the Holy God, you’re in the way to ruin. Consider that awful place concerning the Sons of Eli, 1 Sam 2:25³⁰ “They hearkened not to the voices of their Father, because the lord would slay them.” When children are stubborn and disobedient to Parents, they’re under awful Symptoms of terrible ruin.³¹

... Alas Children, if you once become disobedient to parents, you don’t know what vile abominations God may leave you to fall into. When persons have been brought to die at the gallows for their crimes, how often have they confessed, that disobedience to Parents led them to those crimes?³² As for my own part; except what’s openly irreligious and profane, scarce any thing is more grating and roiling to me, than to see Children rude, saucy, unmannerly, and disobedient to their parents.

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Notes

1. “Base” in this context means a person is without dignity, is acting in a selfish or cowardly way.
2. Fear in this context means to regard with reverence and awe; to revere. Wadsworth does not want children to be afraid of their parents but rather to be respectful and obedient because she or he respects and loves their parents.
3. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus%2019:3&version=9>.
4. All of these quotations are from the Kings James Bible. Wadsworth’s audience would have been very familiar with the Bible. Books were very expensive during the colonial period and most families would have been fortunate if they owned a Bible and an almanac.

About fifty to sixty percent of men could read in colonial North Carolina and about thirty percent of women. If a person could read at all, this was most likely the only book available. In fact, most people who learned to read did so for the express purpose of reading the Bible. If a person had learned this skill, they would read out loud to groups of people, sharing their talents with the whole community.

5. This is the fifth of ten commandments that Christians believe God gave to the Old Testament prophet Moses. “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you” Exodus 20:12
6. See [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2015:4&version=9](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2015:4&version=9;).
7. Wadsworth is referring to Paul, an early Christian missionary who wrote many texts that are now part of the New Testament. An apostle was someone who was asked by Jesus to spread his message and teachings. Although Paul never met Jesus, he believed that Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and called him to be a missionary (or apostle).
8. See [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%206:2&version=9](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%206:2&version=9;).
9. Isaac is an important figure in the Bible and the Torah. It is believed that the Jewish people are his decedents.
10. See [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2022:7&version=9](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2022:7&version=9;).
11. King Solomon is a biblical figure. In the Christian and Jewish traditions, King Solomon was an important leader of the ancient Hebrews. They believe he was a kind and wise ruler and an important spiritual leader. The Bible and Torah credit Solomon with building the first Temple in Jerusalem, as well as other religious buildings.
12. See [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20King%202:20&version=9](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20King%202:20&version=9;).
13. In other words, a child’s words and deeds should show how much they respect their parents.

14. "To rise up" means to stand. Standing when someone enters a room or when one is speaking to a person in authority was a sign of respect. Today, we stand and applaud at live performances to show musicians or actors how much we enjoyed their performance.
15. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverb%2031%2028;&version=9;>
16. See [http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2021%2015;&version=9.](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2021%2015;&version=9;)
17. Any crime where the punishment was death would be classified as a "capital crime."
According to Wadsworth, hitting a person was not a capital crime, unless you hit your mother or father.
18. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverb%2030%2017;&version=9;>
19. What this phrase means is that the person will die and not have a Christian burial. It was important to be buried in "consecrated soil" - or a plot of land that a minister had blessed and set aside for the burial of Christians. If a person was not buried in a church graveyard, then they could not be Resurrected.

Many people in North Carolina believed that eventually the world would come to an end and Jesus would come back to the earth. There would be a thousand years of peace and prosperity, known as the Millennium. At this moment, believers, or saints, would rise from the dead (resurrected.) At the end of the thousand years, the final judgment of all people would take place and people would learn their eternal fate.
20. In this context, crazy means that their body or mind is sick or failing. It does not necessarily mean mentally ill, as it is commonly used today.
21. This phrase would describe any number of mental illnesses.
22. This means that a child could disapprove of his or her parent's actions (such as swearing or drinking) but they still need to show respect to their parents.
23. In this biblical story, the prophet Noah (as in Noah and the Ark) committed a sin by drinking too much wine and falling asleep naked. His son Ham found his father naked and laughed at him, which was disrespectful. His two brothers, however, put a blanket on their father so that no one could see him naked. The next morning when Noah woke up, he put a curse on Ham: "a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren."

During the colonial period, Europeans believed that Africans were decedents of Ham and that their skin was black because of the curse Noah put on Ham. Supporters of slavery often quoted this passage to justify the enslavement of black people - they argued that it was ordained by God, through the words of the prophet Noah, that Africans be enslaved to white people. Since slavery was wide spread in North Carolina, it would have been terrifying to white children to imagine that, for disrespecting their parents, they and their children would become slaves.
24. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%209%2021-25;&version=9;>
25. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%2012%209;&version=9;>
26. *Stout* in this context means proud or stubborn.
27. Without their father's permission.
28. gamble

29. Or, to stay out late at night, which is not appropriate.
30. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Samuel%202%20:25;&version=9;>.
31. While many Christians today believe in a benevolent, kind, loving God, many Christians in the colonial period had a different idea of who God was. This version of God would bring disease to communities, allow Indians to attack a town, or cause a drought, to remind Christians of his power, to humble them, and to cause them to reflect on their sinful ways.

The people who believed in this type of God thought that all people were sinful and wicked all of the time. No matter how hard people tried to be good, they would fail. All people were at the mercy of God. The fact that God didn't wipe people off the face of the earth showed his kind nature. People needed to try as hard as they could to not provoke God's anger, since they were already sinful and at risk of terrible punishments.

32. One of the most popular forms of cheap print in the colonial era were short publications known as broadsides. Some of these broadsides told readers about the lives of criminals who were executed for their crimes. Sometimes, the criminals would dictate their lives and confession of their sins to a ministers, but other times, printers would simply make up the confession using whatever details they could find about the convicted person's life. Always, these confessions talked about the serious of bad choices the person had made before they committed their horrible crime. And, as Wadsworth says in his essay, they usually mentioned that they disobeyed their parents, an early sin that would lead them down a path that ended in their execution.

About the author

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