

## Chapter 8

### Deference: The Character of Jesus In His Followers

What is your personal responsibility to those in authority over you? Because authority comes from above, your Father requires that you submit to that position with an attitude of deference.

- Deference is shown when you avoid choices and decisions that would offend those in authority over you.
- Deference causes you to fulfill your responsibilities with a willing heart rather than as a burden of obligation.
- Deference is linked with *humility*, giving honor and esteem to those who have a right to them.

Deference is at the heart of God's command, "*Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord*" (Leviticus 19:32). Even in modern Israel young people on the bus rise to give their seats to older folks. Disregard for the elderly points to the downfall of not only a nation but also the Church (see Lamentations 4:16,5:12). This culture's exaltation of youth and the exile of retirees into adult communities and convalescent homes have contributed severely to the broken homes and generational rifts now besetting our country and faith communities.

The Bible, on the other hand, commands respect for an older person by the younger generation. Deference is prominent in the command, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth*" (Ephesians 6:1-3). Pleasant consequences are promised to those who learn this facet of obedience early.

Peter specifically addresses the need for character development to include deference: "*Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'* Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5,6). Paul emphasized the essence of deference when he wrote, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Ephesians 5:21), and, "*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others*" (Philippians 2:3,4). Deference sees beyond self-interest to the wider arena of interconnectedness.

Jesus lived in absolute deference to His Father's will. His constant awareness and loving union with His Father made doing His will a joyful responsibility: "*So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me'*" (John 8:28). Filled with this deference toward His Father, Jesus could readily recognize and rejoice in the faith-based deference shown to Him by the centurion discussed earlier: "*The centurion replied, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed'*" (Matthew 8:10). The centurion understood the *spiritual* authority of Jesus and, in humility, deferred to that.

A person who has truly grasped the significance of deference in his heart will go to extreme lengths to uphold those who have authority. David displayed incredible deference

to King Saul even as the monarch was trying to kill him. When David was hiding in a cave with his men, Saul entered alone. David could easily have slain him, and was even urged to do so by his men: *“This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said to you, ‘I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.’ Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul’s robe”* (1 Samuel 24:4).

But even this seemingly inconsequential snip of cloth quickened guilt in David for having violated true deference. By stealing even a portion of the king’s robe David was proving that he had the power to remove the *whole* robe, in other words, to kill him and usurp his authority: *“Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe. He said to his men, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the Lord’”* (1 Samuel 24:5,6).

On several occasions during our retreat ministry men would complain to Mike about the lack of respect from their children. Mike would respond by asking if the men had slandered or gossiped against their superiors in their work place. Their lack of deference on the job was perhaps reaping for them the same fruit at home. Over the years men would return to the center to share how they had asked forgiveness for the slander and gossip they had entertained. Sure enough, many would discover that the home climate had improved as well! Focusing on the Lord’s perspective of the role of the authorities in your life will cause you to serve with joy rather than chafe in selfish irritation. And that attitude will overflow in your home as well.

Deference is the absence of wanting control over your life. It keeps you from protecting yourself from potential emotional hurt. Instead, deference enables you to “die daily” and to please God and those He has placed over you.

An attitude of deference does *not* mean blind submission, however. Living under the oppressive regime of the Babylonians, Daniel and his friends were forced into a decision of conscience. Rather than disobey those in authority over them, the young captives instead made an *appeal* to the guard to eat foods which did not violate their consciences. Because of that deference, the guard accepted their request:

*But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he **asked the chief official for permission** not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel. . . So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead* (Daniel 1:8-16).

Deference is not just a matter of correct behavior. Deference is a *heart issue*. Those who receive your deference know whether they are being honored by your actions. Hundreds of people over the years have discovered a deeper understanding of deference from the following story. The humble have understood the wonderful love that was enacted. Those who are conscious of position or “correct behavior,” however, stumble over it.

Mike and his father enjoyed fishing together, especially very early in the morning before others arrived. Dad liked to anchor in the middle of the lake with a bait on his line that was bigger than most of the fish there. Mike preferred to fish along the shore, casting a lure into the shallow water. During one period in his life Dad had become cantankerous, driving away everyone who might fish with him except for Mike. (In retrospect we can see that Dad was going through the Wounded Warrior stage of his life, as discussed in *Restoring the Early Church*.)

One particular Saturday when Mike was about 13 years old, Dad stopped near the shore so Mike could cast his lure into the shallows. Soon Dad got bored and stood up to start the little outboard motor just as Mike hooked a beautiful bass. He shouted quickly to turn off the motor but Dad retorted, "Just shake the fish off." Disregarding Mike, he began to move the boat out of the shallows. Mike's line snapped and he lost his fish.

In one motion Mike grabbed his father by the belt and threw him into the lake, then turned off the motor. Dad spluttered to the surface bellowing expletives. Picture this 250-pound man in the icy water screaming at this 140-pound 13-year-old who had just thrown him in. If you were the 13-year-old, your mind was desperately scrambling for words. There was no place to hide. As he looked down at the father he loved thrashing in the water, Mike blurted, "You're not getting in this boat until you start smiling."

Dad realized that Mike's actions had not been prompted by rebellion but by a correct appraisal of how he had been treating people. Soon the expletives dissolved into unabashed laughter. Something wonderful passed between father and son that morning. A connection occurred that would become a special source of strength and comfort for both of them, a heart weave that would grow until the day Dad died some 25 years later. The culmination of that connection came a few years before Dad died, when he asked to embrace the same Jesus he saw in Mike.

The combination of godly shepherding by qualified older men and deference by those in the flock to bring joy to the shepherds is key to equipping the spiritual family for service and for fruit-bearing.

## Deference to the Position of Authority

Let's face it: You will always be confronted with those who have authority over you. But it is vital that you separate the *position* of authority from the *acts* of that person. A position of authority (parent, boss, elder) is given to an individual by someone who is *above* him or her, either human or God. That position must be respected, honored, and obeyed. In the military you salute rank. A junior individual who meets a superior salutes first, indicating deference to the rank of the senior. Whether or not the junior likes the senior is irrelevant.

When a person in authority acts in a manner that is detrimental to those in his care, he must be given opportunity to repent and/or change his point of view. You cannot summarily discard a position of authority just because the man has erred or failed to meet your expectations. You didn't give that person authority, *God did*. Through a right spirit you can help him to correctly enact his authority. Even David, although he was king, repented when Nathan the prophet properly confronted him about his sin (see 2 Samuel 11 and 12).

What should you do if those in leadership mandate actions that are contrary to the commands of God? First, gird yourself with prayer so that you may have a humble, teachable heart. Carefully search the Scriptures for passages that will clarify your reasons for objection. Then make an *appeal* to see if they will change their minds. If the appeal is rejected and there is no other position of authority to which you can appeal, then you must uphold God's command.

That was the case with Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They refused to worship the false gods of Nebuchadnezzar and made an appeal based on their trust in the God of Israel. The king's response was a furious command to incinerate them. The young men knew that the king had the authority to do this and entrusted themselves to God's decision to rescue them or not. (See Daniel 3.)

Queen Esther, too, respected the authority of her husband but was willing to face the consequences of her unlawful intrusion into his presence in order to rescue her people. Both her example and that of Daniel's friends demonstrate that if necessary, you must make an appeal to authority no matter what the consequences.

You may find yourself in a situation like the apostles, who insisted before the Sanhedrin that *"we must obey God rather than men"* (see Acts 4:19, 5:29). Make sure that your heart is right and that your position is scriptural. If you feel compelled by conscience to act contrary to the will of the authority over you, it is vital that you have prayerfully received confirmation from two or three others who are mature in the faith. Then boldly obey God and be willing to face the outcome.

Jack, our next door neighbor many years ago, worked in quality assurance for a major corporation. Late one night as Mike was preparing for bed, the Holy Spirit prompted him to go next door to Jack's home. As Jack answered the door Mike could see that he was disturbed about something. Jack shared that as he was leaving for home that afternoon, his supervisor had approached him to pass some material the next day that did not meet specifications. Jack had never done this before and voiced his objection. The supervisor responded, "Do you want to keep your job?" Jack had been awake praying that God would guide him when Mike knocked on the door.

As he and Mike prayed and discussed the problem, they discerned that the appropriate place of appeal was with the personnel department. If the company backed the supervisor, Jack felt he could not continue working for a disreputable company. As only our Father can orchestrate, Jack came home the following evening as the new supervisor of quality assurance. The company wanted men of integrity!

Deference is often most challenging when it hits closest to home: honoring your parents. We used the following passage earlier as a means for developing deference: *"Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth"* (Ephesians 6:1-3).

Note that God did not specify that they had to be wonderfully loving or godly parents in order to be honored. It is critical for children to honor the *position* of authority that God gives a parent, and to separate the God-given position from the way they carry out that role. Failure to give parents the deference that God requires results in children who suffer needless misery for years and wonder why. As promised in His Word, our Father will discipline the bitter and rebellious by ensuring that little goes well for them.

Some people are trapped because they can't forgive their parents in their heart for past sins or abuses. Others stay embittered because the parent(s) did not meet the child's expectations. Yet forgiveness *from the heart* is a non-optional command from the Lord: *"In anger his master turned him over to the jailers [tormentors] until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother [or mother or father] from your heart"* (Matthew 18:34,35).

The Bible tells us, and the early Church understood this point clearly, that the Father will not consummate His covenant with a bitter person: *"But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"* (Matthew 6:15). Failure to forgive others indicates that you do not appreciate the preciousness of the blood Jesus shed to forgive your sins. Bitterness reflects pride, which forces the Father to oppose you (see James 4:6).

At the retreat center one of our neighbors had several sons who had moved far away before we arrived. This man (we'll call him Ted) was full of deep bitterness, always trying to dominate everyone around him. One day Sue said, "Mike, I really prefer that you not become Ted's friend." Sue had based her appeal on Proverbs 22:24,25: *"Do not make friends*

*with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.*" So Mike agreed, and tried to maintain just a neighborly acquaintance with the man.

About two years after we moved to the retreat center, Ted's sons came home for the holidays. The day before they were due to leave, the oldest asked to meet privately with Mike. Angrily the young man shouted, "How can you take living near my father? He's driven his children and everyone else away. Mom has told me how he tries to hurt you. How can you stand him?"

Mike asked, "Do you feel like you have to draw your sword every time you're around your father?" His emphatic yes confirmed the intensity of his frustration and anger. He admitted that he and his brothers had fled their father in order to escape the emotional pain. Each one, though, felt guilty about what their mother had to endure. Mike studied him with loving concern, then asked if he'd ever seen the movie *Return of the Jedi*. In the movie, young Luke Skywalker duels with his father, Darth Vader, the second-most evil person in the galaxy. Then Luke realizes the futility of anger and, in deference to his father, turns off his light saber. This action ultimately wins the heart of his father, who joins Luke to defeat the evil Emperor. The moral of the story? If there is to be any healing between father and son, the child must in deference drop his sword first.

At the request of this son, Ted's children came together to see Mike. After he explained the biblical basis for his counsel, they agreed that restoration was God's will. Each one went to his father to ask forgiveness for his bitter attitude toward him. The boys' deference profoundly impacted the older man. A short while later he journeyed to the side of his own father just days before the old gentleman died, and asked forgiveness for the bitterness he'd held for so long.

Can you see how the poison of bitterness passes from generation to generation? Ponder this anecdote from our sheep flock. A local 4-H'er offered us his ewe. She was a good-looking sheep and we gratefully added her to our flock. Not too long after, we noticed she was limping. Close inspection revealed the shepherd's bane: foot rot. A highly contagious affliction, foot rot destroys the hoof tissue, crippling the sheep and hindering her ability to graze. To our dismay, the entire flock had been infected. How many hours were spent dipping hooves into copper sulfate and cutting away rotted tissue! The lesson we learned has spiritual implications: No matter how wonderful a sheep looks on the outside, if the infection of bitterness is present, you can be sure that others will be contaminated by it. Bitter people and infected sheep cause trouble and defile many! (See Hebrews 12:15.)

One of the most powerful treasures that God gives to man is the gift of humility. True deference cannot exist without humility. Humility looks to the interest of others to honor and support them. The word *honor* in Greek means to prize, revere, or value. You might not think you have much to revere in your parents but look at it this way: *they gave you life*. They were the vessels from whom the Father brought you forth. When you come to grips with that reality, remember that how you respond from this moment onward is up to you: "*So in everything, do to [your parents] what you would have [your children] do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets*" (Matthew 7:12).

A life of dedicated service to the Lord you trust honors your heavenly Father even if your parents don't know Him or care about Him. Your Father hears and answers the prayer of the righteous. He would love to surround your parents with a cloud of witnesses and circumstances that would reveal Jesus to them! And if your folks have already died, God would enjoy healing you when you release the sting of those painful memories by *forgiving from your heart*. In its deepest essence, forgiveness is the epitome of deference.