
13 THE WISDOM OF CONFUCIUS

The teachings of Confucius, who lived from 551 B.C. to 479 B.C., are so rooted in Chinese culture that an understanding of China is almost impossible without knowledge of them. The importance of the family and respect for one's elders are two themes that frequently recur in Confucian philosophy. In the following excerpt from China: Selected Readings, edited by Hyman Kublin, Confucius explains the meaning and importance of filial piety—reverence for one's mother and father. As you read the excerpt, note how Confucius suggests filial piety may be put into practice.

The Scholars

The connecting link between serving one's father and serving one's mother is love. The connecting link between serving one's father and serving one's prince is reverence. Thus, the mother [brings forth] love, while the prince calls forth reverence. But to the father belong both—love and reverence. Therefore, to serve the prince with filiality is to serve him with loyalty.

Likewise, to serve one's elders reverently paves the way for civic obedience. Loyal and obedient without fail in the service of their superiors, they will preserve their rank and offices. For the rest, they will carry on their family sacrifices. This is the filiality of scholars. The Odes say:

Rise early and retire late,

Not to discredit those [from whom you are born].

"The connecting link between serving one's father and serving one's mother is love."

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The Common People

Following the laws of nature; utilizing the earth to the best advantage according to the various qualities of the soil; restricting one's personal desires and enjoyment in order to support one's parents—this is the filiality of the common people. So it is that, from the Son of Heaven [the Emperor] to the commoners, if filial piety is not pursued from beginning to end, disasters are sure to follow.

The Government of the Sage

The relation between father and son is rooted in nature and develops into the proper relation between prince and ministers. Parents give one life; no bond could be stronger. They watch over their child with utmost care; no love could be greater. Therefore, to love others without first loving one's parents is to act against virtue. To reverence other men without first reverencing one's parents is to act against propriety. If we model right upon such perversity, the people have no true [standard] to follow. In this there is no goodness; it is all evil. Although such a person may gain position, men of learning and virtue will not esteem him.

The practice of a virtuous man is different: his speech is praiseworthy; his actions are enjoyable; his righteousness is respected; his management of affairs is [worthy of imitation]; his deportment is pleasing; his gait is measured. He descends to his people; therefore, they look on him with awe and love; they imitate and seek to resemble him. Thus, he realizes his own virtuous teaching and puts into effect his own directives. The Odes say:

The virtuous man, the princely one,
Has nothing wrong in his deportment.

The Practice of Filiality

The master said: "In serving his parents a filial son renders utmost respect to them while at home; he supports them with joy; he gives them tender care in sickness; he grieves at their death; he sacrifices to them with solemnity. If he has measured up to these five, then he is truly capable of serving his parents.

"He who really loves his parents will not be proud in high station. He will not be insubordinate to an inferior position. Among his equals he will not be [quarrelsome]. To be proud in high station is to be ruined. To be insubordinate to an inferior position is to incur punishment. To be [quarrelsome] among one's equals leads to physical violence. As long as these three evils are not uprooted, a son cannot be called filial even though he feast his parents daily on the three kinds of choice meat. . . .

"When parents are alive, to serve them with love and reverence; when deceased, to cherish their memory with deep grief—this is the sum total of man's fundamental duty, the fulfillment of the mutual relations between the living and the dead, the accomplishment of the filial son's service of his parents."

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READING REVIEW

1. According to Confucius what paves the way for civic obedience?
2. Why does Confucius call loving and reverencing others without first loving and reverencing one's parents a *perversity*?
3. Why do you think Confucius believes a son who is guilty of the three evils cannot be considered filial?