Marcus’s behavior shows that he respects his father’s wishes and fears his displeasure just as strongly. The relationship between Roman parents and children was quite different from that in some modern societies. American children gradually become quite independent of parents by their late teens, even to the extent of choosing their marriage partner themselves. Such independence has developed only quite recently in the history of the family.

The Roman father was the supreme head (paterfamiliās) of his family (familia), which included his wife, his married and unmarried children, and his slaves. As master (dominus), he had the power to sell or kill his slaves. If he married his wife with full legal power (manus), he became owner of her property, and she ceased to belong to her own family, becoming legally a member of his. Over his children he exercised a fatherly power (patria potestās) that allowed him to determine their lives as he wished.
According to Roman tradition, the concept of *patria potestās* was established by the first king of Rome:

Romulus gave the Roman father absolute power over his son. This power the father had until he died whether he imprisoned his son, whipped him, threw him into chains and made him labor on the farm, or even killed him. Romulus even let the Roman father sell his son into slavery.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.26–27 (extracts)

The Roman father continued to have complete control even over his adult children, arranging their marriages—and divorces—and managing any property they might own. He exercised his *patria potestās* over *their* children as well.
In most instances, a father’s *patria potestās* ended only with his death. A father might, however, “emancipate” his adult son, who then had *patria potestās* over his sons. A daughter who married might remain under her father’s *potestās*, but her father could transfer this power into the hands of his son-in-law; such a marriage was called “marriage with *manus*” (literally, “hand”).

How strictly and severely a father exercised his *potestās* varied according to personal inclination and situation. Cicero reluctantly accepted one young man as son-in-law due to the urging of his wife and of his daughter, Tullia, and he later ruefully arranged for Tullia’s divorce upon her request. Another father slew his adult son in 62 B.C. because he had participated in the Catilinarian conspiracy against the Roman state. There were controls over the exercise of *patria potestās*. The slaying of a child had first to be discussed in a council of adult male relatives. Public opinion also might influence a father. Gradually, too, Roman law imposed some limits, requiring, for instance, that a daughter consent to her marriage.
True love and affection between parent and child were not eliminated by *patria potestās*. However, a father—and mother—were expected primarily to provide a moral education for their children, to prepare sons for service to the state and family through careers as magistrates, and to prepare daughters to educate and rear worthy future members of the family and state. The poet Statius, writing in the last decade of the first century A.D., congratulates his friend, Julius Menecrates, on the upbringing of his sons and daughter:

From their father may your children learn peaceful ways and from their grandfather may they learn generosity, and from them both eagerness for glorious virtue. Because of their position and birth, the daughter will enter a noble house upon marriage, and the sons as soon as they become men will enter the threshold of Romulus’s Senate house.

Statius, to Julius Menecrates (*Silvae* 4.8.57–62, extracts)
The tragic legend of a Roman father who felt compelled to order the execution of his own sons for disloyalty to the state is memorialized in the painting, *Lictors Bearing the Bodies of His Sons to Brutus*. 
*Lictors Bearing the Bodies of His Sons to Brutus*, 1789, *Jacques-Louis David*
Though the Romans may not have displayed the bond between parent and child as openly and as physically as we do, they considered it sacred: Cicero called parental love *amor ille penitus insitus*, “that love implanted deeply within.”

A newborn child would be placed at its father’s feet, and the father would accept it into the family by lifting it in his arms. Statius expressed his love for his adopted son as follows:

> He was mine, mine. I saw him lying upon the ground, a new-born baby, and I welcomed him with a natal poem as he was washed and anointed. When he demanded air for his new life with trembling cries, I set him in Life’s roll.

> From your very moment of birth I bound you to me and made you mine. I taught you sounds and words, I comforted you and soothed your hidden hurts. When you crawled on the ground, I lifted you up and kissed you, and rocked you to sleep myself and summoned sweet dreams for you.

Statius, *Silvae* 5.5.69–85 (extracts)
The consequences of disregarding a father’s instructions were immortalized among the ancients in the legend of Icarus, son of Daedalus the inventor. He perished because he disobediently flew too near the sun on wings of wax his father created. Here is Dürer’s engraving of that legend.

Woodcut, The Fall of Icarus, 1495