

“Honor Your Parents”
Ten Commandments Series, No. 6
Ephesians 6:1-4
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I chose to read the 5th commandment from Ephesians rather than from the Ten Commandments themselves, found first in Exodus 20 and then again in Deuteronomy 5. I did this for several reasons. There are still some Christian believers who doubt that the first 39 books of the Bible, what we call the Old Testament, where the Ten Commandments are twice listed, are of much use to Christians today. Several generations of Christians have been taught that the Law of Moses was for the saints of the ancient epoch, not for Christians today, that the Ten Commandments apply today either only to the extent that they are repeated in the New Testament or that they have been replaced by the law of love. Even some Presbyterians embraced this viewpoint. I am at present reading a biography of Edward J. Young, the preternaturally gifted linguist and OT scholar who taught for thirty years at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia before his untimely death in 1968. As a seminarian in his final year Young was invited to teach a class at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, as you know, now a prominent PCA church. When its pastor, the famous Donald Grey Barnhouse, learned that the subject was the Ten Commandments, he withdrew the offer for Young to teach a class. Barnhouse was a Presbyterian but he no longer believed that the Ten Commandments were a subject to be taught to Christians. [D. Young, *For Me to Live is Christ: The Life of Edward J. Young*, 50, 73] Now Barnhouse didn't think it was now acceptable for Christians to have other gods or to commit adultery. But he didn't think that *because this was demanded in the Ten Commandments*.

This idea that the Law of God such as we find it in the Ten Commandments was done away with in the new epoch is the theology that is called *dispensationalism*. It was very influential in the first two-thirds of the 20th century. It is not as widespread or influential as it used to be, but its influence has by no means disappeared. But the fact is you can find the Ten Commandments everywhere in the Bible, and in many different forms. Indeed, all of the Ten Commandments reappear in various ways in the New Testament. You will notice here, for example, that Paul's point isn't that the fifth commandment still applies, as if that were in doubt. He assumes that! He is saying that it is the first commandment of the ten to which is added a promise. The assumption – clear as day – is that the Ten Commandments remain in force and must be obeyed. That goes without saying, though Paul actually says as much elsewhere. This is one of any number of instances in the NT where the law of God is cited from the OT as law which we must obey. The thought that the Ten Commandments might now be passé is never remotely suggested anywhere in the Bible and, of course, is explicitly contradicted in the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

I chose this text also because it reminds us that the Commandments, all ten of them, really serve as titles or headings for whole areas of duty. Here, for example, Paul addresses both parents and children but not only them. This is one of a series of paragraphs in chapters 5 and 6 regarding the submission that Christians owe to those in authority over them. As Calvin comments on the 5th commandment:

“...although particular mention is made here of the father and the mother, there can be no doubt about God’s wanting to provide a general doctrine with respect to honoring all [forms of] authority. ...we are forced to conclude in this text that God has commanded that all [persons] who enjoy any superior status are to be honored and obeyed.” [B. Farley (ed.), *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 134-135]

So, while I too will talk about the family – parents and children – the commandment applies, necessary changes being made, to citizens and their government, to workers and their bosses, to soldiers and their officers, to students and their teachers, and so on. What is more, in the same way as we are required to honor our parents, Paul goes on to say that our parents are required to love and serve us. Parents are charged by the Lord to raise their children in the love and the truth of God, whose children they are first and foremost. In other words, the fifth commandment involves a network or web of relational obligations. The obligations of love are not a one-way street! These analogous or related duties belong in their own way to each of the commandments. For example, we must not steal, but the owners of goods must not abuse their position and impoverish people to their own advantage. We must not lie, but people must not put others in a position where lying seems the only honorable alternative. We must not covet, but those who have what others wish they had must not flaunt their advantages or think themselves better for them. And so on. All of this is made very clear in the Bible’s own comprehensive exposition of the Law.

Text Comment

- v.1 Notice Paul’s reason for the obedience of children. It is *right!* In all likelihood the best interpretation of Paul’s words, “it is right,” is that Paul is appealing to the universal sense of right and wrong. And, of course, in this case, hardly anyone would have disagreed: Greeks, Romans, or Jews. It is right for children to obey their parents! Of course, it is. Such obedience is naturally right, essential to human welfare. Christianity does not do away with the obligations of nature, it redeems and purifies them.
- v.3 As you remember, the wording of the fifth commandment as we find it in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is “so that you may live long *in the land* the Lord your God is giving you.” “The land,” is a very important idea in the OT. In fact, if I remember correctly, the Hebrew word, “land,” [אֶרֶץ] is the fourth most commonly used noun in the OT. But “land” in the Ten Commandments is, of course, a reference to Canaan, the Promised Land. But the law of God, being universal in its authority and its application, is here re-signalized or reapplied to a Gentile audience, to believers who didn’t live in Canaan. Jesus does the same thing himself in his Sermon on the Mount when he takes a text from Psalm 37 and changes it from “the meek shall inherit the land” to “the meek shall inherit the earth.” Paul does the same thing in Romans 4:13 where the promise to Abraham that his offspring should inherit the Promised Land is altered to “inherit the world.” And, here, in Eph. 6:3 the promise to live a long life in the land is altered, according to the Gentile believers’ situation in Ephesus, to “enjoy long life on the earth.” This re-signalizing of the term “land” is entirely appropriate because the land in the OT was not as important for itself, as a piece of real estate, as it was for what it represented: the blessings of the kingdom of God and heaven itself, as we are taught in many places in the

Bible. So that promise of a blessed life, being the same for Jews and Gentiles, the same for those who lived before and after the incarnation, is described in a slightly different way, a way appropriate to the new situation of the Gentile church.

It is an extraordinary artifact of divine creation that the human race is today as it has always been a population of *families*. I do not mean simply that every human being has a mother and father, that we all must have biological parents. I mean that human life is generated, organized, matured, and sustained in the circle of *the family*. Not only do children derive their appearance, intelligence, physical health, intellectual gifts, and so on from their parents, they are greatly influenced for good or ill by the quality, the affection, the wisdom, and the intention of the parental nurture that they received at home. Not only do parents bring children into the world, their own personal loves, hopes, and commitments are bound up with their children. They cannot be happy if their children are not happy. There is nothing like this elsewhere in the animal kingdom. There is no biological necessity for what the whole world understands a family to be, for family love, for family solidarity. But the family is nevertheless a fact of human life.

So much is this the case that, as everyone knows, healthy, loving families are essential to the physical, psychological, and spiritual health and happiness of people from childhood to adulthood. Whether we are talking about healthy eating habits or obesity, relational dysfunction or relational intelligence, laziness or ambition, bitterness or a sweet spirit, and so much else, the life of the family determines so much of a person's character and way of life. It is no small kindness, then, that as we read in Psalm 68, God has "set the lonely in families." When God created the human race, he created it as a family, a husband and a wife, ready to bear children and to make a home. It is a fabulously significant fact we take far too much for granted because we are so accustomed to it!

This natural fact then becomes an essential feature of God's way of salvation, as children raised in godly families become in immense numbers Christians themselves. The relationship between parents and children is thus sanctified and becomes a means of God's saving grace. The family thus becomes in fundamental ways the foundation of the church as well. And it is the place of the family in salvation that also explains the fact that when someone becomes a Christian he or she becomes *a member of God's family*, brothers and sisters of every other Christian and the children of God. *There is something like a family in the inner life of God himself; a fellowship of love and of distinct relationships, and that life is then reflected in the life of God's people.* In a deep and mysterious way, to be made in the image of God is to be made for life in a family!

We are taught in the Bible that God is our Father and Christ is our brother. They become the perfect models of parent and child. It is simply a fact of human life, one of the most fundamental of all facts, that God has created human beings to want, to need, and to find the fullness of life in the intimate circle of the family. Listen to this beautiful panegyric to the family by Herman Bavinck, the great Dutch theologian.

"The family is not of man's making; it is a gift of God and full of life. Upbringing in the family has a special character. No school or educational institution can replace or compensate for the family. Everything educates in the family, the handshake of the father, the voice of the mother, the older brother, the younger sister, the baby in the

cradle, the sick loved ones, the grandparents and grandchildren, the uncles and aunts, the guests and friends, prosperity and adversity, the feast day and the day of mourning, Sundays and workdays, the prayer and thanksgiving at the table, the reading of God's Word, the morning and evening prayer. Everything is engaged to educate one another, from day to day, from hour to hour, unintentionally, without previously devised plan, method, or system. ... A thousand insignificant things, a thousand trifles, a thousand details, all have their effect. It is life itself that here educates, life in its greatness, the rich inexhaustible, universal life. The family is the school of life, because there is its spring and its hearth." [Kok, *Herman Bavinck*, 18-19; my translation]

We know this is so don't we. We know it is so even if the families in which we were raised, as is true of some of us, were pale shadows, if not travesties of what a family ought to be. Nothing does more harm and nothing does more good than the family. Yet even those raised in dysfunctional families have a God-given understanding of what parents *should* be and what a family *ought to be*.

So how perfectly understandable it is that God should have included the life of the family in the Ten Commandments. Indeed, if you think carefully about the commandments it will occur to you that every important dimension of human life and happiness is covered in these Ten Commandments. Our relationship to God, our Maker, our Savior, and our Judge comes first, as it must. Then our life as workers and resters. Then our life as members of a family. Then our life as neighbors, as people who are obliged to care for other people, our life as property holders, our sexual life, and, then, our words and our thoughts. Take the commandments together and find me, if you can, a single dimension of your life that is not addressed in the Ten Commandments! This is all the more the case once we understand the commandments as titles for whole areas of duty. After all, the fifth commandment might just as well have been, "Parents raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," the very thing that the ancient Scriptures command elsewhere and that Paul commands here. But in the 5th commandment the Lord chose to address the children instead of the parents. Why? Perhaps no one can say, though one thing that occurs to me is that while parents raise their children for only a period of some twenty years or so, children can honor their parents for a lifetime.

So now think with me of what it means to honor one's parents. Surely it means to obey them when you are children at home, when you are under their authority. But it is the Bible itself that acknowledges that such authority does not last into adulthood. "A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife," we read at the very beginning of the Bible and of human life. But one can "honor" one's parents even when he or she is also a parent, even sometimes a grandparent.

The verb translated "honor" in the commandment is interesting. It derives from a noun meaning "weight" or an adjective meaning "heavy." The adjective is used, for example, to say that Eli was a heavy man or that Absalom's hair was heavy. This led to the idea, now not literal but figurative, of "weighty" as noteworthy or glorious, which then led to the verb which means to acknowledge someone's great status, station, or importance. *To honor someone, in other words, is to consider them weighty.* [TDOT, VII, 16; TWOT, vol. I, 426] It means to respect them, to

esteem them, to acknowledge their worth. Obedience is one important way in which we do that, but, of course, there are many other ways to honor or esteem one's parents.

As I said, I happen to be reading a biography of the late E.J. Young, the OT scholar, written by his son, the geologist Davis Young, now himself in his retirement. I have books on my shelves by both father and son. E.J. Young died in 1968, so he will not be a reader of the book that his son has written about him. But, as Davis makes clear in his preface, in writing the book he was discharging a debt, he was honoring his father and seeking others who would honor him as well. He writes, "I herewith present to the reader the result of a labor of love and an expression of gratitude to God..." Surely *that* is an act of obedience to the 5th commandment!

So is virtually anything a child, even an adult child does that shows affection, esteem, and gratitude to a parent, from expressions of affection and gratitude, to remembering a birthday, to maintaining regular communication, and finally to caring for them in age and infirmity. We all understand this. These are the obligations of love and honor. Human beings in general understand that; you don't have to be a Christian to understand that. *This is right!*

But to emphasize this, think now about your own situation, your own family, your own parents, and your own life. There may be things – indeed I know that in some cases there very definitely are things about your parents that have made your life difficult, that trouble you, annoy you, that cause problems between you and your folks, or did while they were still alive. We find such in any family at least to some extent. There are things that our parents have done or have failed to do for which we cannot commend them. Christians especially, who have a deeper understanding of the sacred calling of parents, are alert to what should have been and was not in the family in which they were raised.

This Dad was too often angry or overbearing; he provoked his children to anger or discouraged them; exactly what Paul forbids Christian fathers to do. This mother was either indifferent to her children's hearts or overprotective and smothering. These parents made one foolish decision after another. These parents never taught the Word of God to their children, never demonstrated the life of prayer, never set an example of Christian love, devotion, and service. This mother and dad paraded an unhappy marriage before their children, setting for them a bad example of what marriage ought to be. We know from experience how parents can make life difficult for sons- and daughters-in-law, for grandchildren, for their own adult children, and so on. Some aged parents are demanding to the point of exasperation, others never forget a perceived slight, and the list goes on. Even the best of Christian parents have faults that can affect their children for the rest of their lives. We know this. Certainly, we who are Christian parents – if we are serious and thoughtful at all – are only too well aware of our own faults and worried what unhappy consequences our faults may have caused in the hearts and lives of our children. I'm think I am more grateful for God's forgiveness of my sins as the father of my children and I think more often about that forgiveness than his forgiveness of any other of my many sins. Those are the worst of my sins and the sins that trouble me the most.

But we must also never forget this. A human baby is probably the most dependent of all creatures in his or her infancy. Perhaps we could put it this way: the human baby is the least fit of all baby creatures to survive. He must be fed. Her diaper must be changed lest she develop a

rash. He must be put to bed in a place conducive to the sleep he needs. And so, it goes, day after day, month after month, and year after year. He does not walk until after he is one year old. She does not talk until she is almost two. They cannot be left in the bathtub by themselves without risk of drowning. I knew a mother who neglected that fact to answer a phone call, her baby drowned in the family bathtub, and she lived with the guilt and the punishing self-condemnation for the rest of her life! Children cannot provide for themselves for years after their birth. What is more, their obedience to their parents is essential to their wellbeing. He is naturally curious and so grabs for the handle of the pan on the stove. He must obey when his mother shouts, “No!” Indeed, he must obey instantly or tragedy may ensue. She must be buckled up in her car seat no matter that she resents the confinement. Otherwise she might be seriously injured. He must endure a shot to protect him against diseases that for centuries were fatal to multitudes of children. Everyone understands this. The child does not know, does not understand, and cannot be counted on to do the responsible, the necessary thing. Parents must see to every aspect of his or her life!

You are alive today because your parents cared for you, fed you, clothed you, took you to the doctor, made sure you got adequate sleep, kept you away from danger, taught you what life required every step of the way. They poured their lives into you *and in the case of most parents they didn't regret a single moment, a single late night as they sought to get you back to sleep, a single trip to the doctor, a single sacrifice of time, money, or effort that raising you required of them.*

What is more, and perhaps still more important, in childhood a person learns obedience as a principle of life. The family is a school of obedience, not just of obedience to this particular order or that, but obedience itself. For no one ever escapes the need to obey and the art of obedience, willing, ready, intentional obedience is one of the most basic necessities of a happy, well-ordered life. This is true, of course, of any human being. You must obey the traffic laws, the IRS regulations, your company's policies, and on and on.

But it is more profoundly true in the Christian life. One of the greatest gifts Christian parents can give their children is an appreciation of the wisdom of obedience: that God's commandments are not burdens but boons, that God commands us precisely because he loves us, that Christ himself loved to obey his Father and accomplished our salvation by doing so, and that not only our holiness but our happiness will increase with the measure of our obedience to God. As the Scripture says, “In keeping the commandments of God there is a great reward.” An obedient Christian life for a great many Christians begins at home and continues to its eternal reward. *Christian children learn to obey God by learning to obey their parents!* That is what the 5th commandment promises: a long life on the earth, which is just the Bible's way of saying the blessing of God on one's life here and in the world to come.

That was the Lord's life first as a boy and then as a man. He was raised in a godly family by godly parents. He was taught to know and love the Word of God. The three texts from Deuteronomy that he used to ward off the temptations of the Devil in the wilderness he learned at his mother's knee. He was given good examples of love and godliness to imitate. His parents prayed for him and with him. They explained things to him in ever greater detail as he grew up. However mysterious that statement in Hebrews 5 may be, the Bible teaches that Jesus “learned

obedience!” He learned it first at home. And the result of that parental love and instruction and the result of the honor he paid to his parents was the godly life he lived as a man, that life upon which hung your hope and my hope of eternal life. Remember, one of our Savior’s last acts while he hung dying on the cross was to care for his mother

Have you thought about this, about the genuine humanity of the Lord Jesus? He didn’t appear on the earth as an adult man as the first Adam had. He came into the world as a helpless baby, absolutely dependent upon his parents. He was raised a boy in a family with brothers and sisters; he was taught obedience by his parents; he had to honor and obey them: why? Because he had to live a perfect *human* life *and such is human life*, a life of parents and children and of the honor paid by one to the other.

There is a world of meaning and of calling and of blessing in the 5th commandment. There is a world of happy human life in that commandment. Honor your parents! I loved and admired my parents, for all their faults and, of course, they had some; though, I think, theirs were not as many as mine. I was at the bedside when each of them died. Indeed, I preached both of their funerals, which was, I felt at the time and still do, a gift of God and an unusual privilege. To honor such parents *is right!* It is a duty, but it is, or ought to be, less a duty than a debt of love and gratitude. God gave us parents, he placed us in a family because he knew how much we needed a family.

And if our parents were bad parents, as some parents are; if they harmed us in certain ways; if we bear the scars of our upbringing, we can honor them still for giving us life and sending us into adulthood where we have learned to do better ourselves. They may not have been the stewards of our lives as God called them to be, but they got us to that place where, by God’s grace, we found for ourselves and now for our own children the salvation of God and the hope of everlasting life. And such are no small things! And, remember this, *your* children will honor *their* parents because, in some significant measure, they learned to do so by watching you honor your father and your mother! That is how they will know that to honor one’s parents *is right!*