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KEEPING THE FIFTH

Exodus 20:12 (Eph. 6:1-4)

By

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Mother's Day Message

Keeping the Fifth
Exodus 20:12 (Eph. 6:1-4)

We live in a day of rampant children's rights. In Sweden, a model for the movement, it is illegal to spank your children or even to administer such discipline as sending them to bed or depriving them of TV. The laws are enforced by social workers, special courts, and the police. In our country, children now can divorce their parents and move on to a new set who will not be so demanding. Years ago the Duke of Windsor observed, "The thing that impresses me about America is the way parents obey their children."

This widespread disregard for parental authority over their children, coupled with the influence of psychology, which has advised us not to do anything to stifle a child's emotions or to damage his self-esteem, has led to a disregard, even in Christian circles, of keeping the fifth of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and mother." The apostle Paul puts it, "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 be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:3). Having just studied Ham, who as an adult dishonored his father Noah, resulting in a curse on Ham's descendants through Canaan, I thought it would be fitting on this Mother's Day to take a look at the neglected Fifth Commandment.

As you know, the Ten Commandments may be divided into two sections, each reinforcing the two greatest commandments. The first four commands spell out what it means to love the Lord our God: Not to have any other gods before Him; not to make or serve any idols; not to take His name in vain; and, to keep the sabbath day holy. The last six commands teach us how to love our neighbor as we do, in fact, love ourselves: To honor our fathers and mothers; not to murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet anything belonging to our neighbor.

Standing at the head of this second section, the commandment to honor our parents is foundational to keeping all that follow. If we truly honor our parents, we will not disgrace their name by becoming a murderer, by being unfaithful to our marriage vows, by stealing, by lying, or by the greed and discontent underlying covetousness. The keeping of the Fifth Commandment also works back toward the first four. If we are rebellious and disrespectful toward our parents who gave us life and sustenance, we will also probably be rebellious and disrespectful toward the Lord God, our creator and sustainer. Disrespect toward parents and God will also carry over into disrespect for all authority, and thus will result in a breakdown of law and order, leading to a disintegration of the very basis for civilized society. Thus the keeping of the Fifth Commandment is not some outmoded, quaint idea to be set aside without consequence. It is vital to the survival of our nation.

Before we look at what it means to keep this command, I want to point out that if you keep it, you and your family will stand out as distinct from our culture, especially when your children are teenagers. I reject the culturally accepted idea, brought to us by those wonderful folks in developmental psychology, that a period of rebellion and defiance is the norm for teenagers. It has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, even in Christian homes, where parents lamely shrug their shoulders at their kids' rebellion and excuse it with, "Well, it's just a phase they have to go through." Nonsense! Christian teenagers can and must honor, obey, and respect their parents out of submission to the Lord. When they do this, it will open the door for witness in a world where rebellion and disrespect for parents is the norm. As we examine this commandment, I want to make two main points:

As children, we should honor our parents; as parents,
we should live worthily of our children's honor.

Then I want to discuss under a third heading what children should do when their parents are not deserving of their honor.

1. As children, we should honor our parents.

First, we need to understand what the command means; then, we will look at some ways we can demonstrate our obedience to it.

THE MEANING OF "HONOR":

The word translated "honor" is a Hebrew word with a root meaning of "weight" or "heaviness." It is the same word often translated "glory" in reference to the Lord. To glorify the Lord is to attach the utmost weight or significance to who He is and what He does. It means to assign Him the highest place because He is worthy of it. The opposite of glorifying God is to treat Him lightly, to shrug off Him and His commands as insignificant. Coupled with the idea of weight is that of value, which is the root meaning of the Greek word for honor. Gold and silver are heavy, valuable metals. We say of a valuable man, "He's worth his weight in gold."

Applied to parents, to honor them is to have an attitude of respect for them that stems from the fact that we greatly value them and the contribution they've made to our lives. To honor our parents is to assign a high place of value to them. This attitude of respect and high esteem will result in loving actions toward them. The motivation for doing this should be to please and glorify the Lord Jesus who set the example of obedience to His earthly parents in order to please His Heavenly Father.

THE MEANS OF HONORING OUR PARENTS:

(1) When you're young, you honor your parents by obeying their instruction and submitting to their correction. This is clear in Paul's linking, "Children obey your parents" with the command to honor them (Eph. 6:1-3). When Paul states, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," he does not mean, "Obey your parents only if they are in the Lord" (that is, Christians). Nor does he mean, "Obey your parents when you think their decisions are in line with what you think the Lord wants." He means, it is your duty in the Lord to obey your parents. The Book of Proverbs, after a brief introduction, begins, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching; indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head, and ornaments about your neck" (Prov. 1:8-9).

The only exception to obeying your parents would be if they commanded you to do something that is a clear violation of Scripture. But even then, you must demonstrate to your parents a submissive spirit that seeks to please them. You should respectfully appeal to them and explain your reasons why you cannot obey

them in this instance. You should show that it grieves you to have to disobey them. And, you should submit to any punishment they impose without complaint or rebellion, but with a heart of joy in the Lord, that you are counted worthy to suffer for His name. But such times when you must disobey your parents out of obedience to God will probably be rare.

(2) As you grow older, you honor your parents by respecting them, treating them with kindness, and holding their counsel in high regard. It is never right to despise or ridicule your parents, even if they have done something deserving of such treatment. We saw this with Ham, who flippantly looked on his father's drunkenness and nakedness, rather than respectfully covering him as his two brothers did (Gen. 9:21-24).

There comes a point, of course, where you move out from under your parents' authority and are no longer obligated to obey them. Wise parents let the reins go gradually, so that a young person assumes more and more responsibility for his own life, until he is on his own. When is that? It is not necessarily at some arbitrary age, such as 18 or even 21. But a general rule of thumb is, if you are chafing under your parents' authority, you are probably not ready to be out from under it. Your obedience to your parents shows that you are mature enough to live apart from their direct authority, and that you are under the lordship of Christ.

But even when you're out from under your parents' authority, you always remain under their counsel. As an adult, you answer directly to God, but it would be foolish to shrug off your parents' counsel without careful consideration. There are times as a Christian young person when you must follow God's leading, for example, to go to the mission field, even though your parents (who may even be believers) don't want you to go. In order to obey God by going to seminary, and later moving to Europe to serve God, Francis Schaeffer had to say to his parents, "I love you, and I'm sorry to make you unhappy, but I am convinced that this is what God wants me to do, and I am going to do it." His resolute obedience to God was in the end the means of bringing first his father and later his mother to faith in Jesus Christ (told by Edith Schaeffer, *Lifelines* [Crossway Books], pp. 115-116). But even in going against his parents' wishes, Schaeffer showed them respect and kindness.

(3) As your parents grow older, you honor them by caring for them and providing for their needs as you are able. Paul directs children and grandchildren to make some return to their aged parents by caring for them and providing for their needs, and adds, "for this is acceptable in the sight of God." He goes on to say that if we do not provide for our own families (he means both our immediate families and our aged parents), we have denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:4, 8). The best arrangement may or may not be to have an aged parent live in our own homes. Each family has the freedom to determine the specific arrangements under the Lord. But it is not right as Christians to abandon our elderly parents to a nursing home so that we can ignore them. One way we show honor is by giving a person our time. This certainly applies to elderly parents. Our responsibility to honor our parents goes all through life.

There's a second side to the Fifth Commandment. I can only touch on it briefly:

2. As parents, we should live worthily of our children's honor.

When Paul gives the command to children to honor and obey their parents, he immediately balances it by commanding the parents (especially, fathers) not to provoke their children to anger, but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). As I'll mention in a moment, children must honor their parents whether the parents deserve it or not. But, even so, as parents we must not neglect God's commands to us to rear our children in His ways. This involves two main things:

(1) As parents, we should be examples of godliness in our homes. Children listen to our lives much more than to our lectures. If we preach Christianity but practice hypocrisy, they will not be inclined to honor either us or the Lord Jesus Christ. Being an example of godliness does not imply perfection, because even godly parents are sinners. But it does mean that we walk in the Spirit, growing in the expression of the fruit of the Spirit in our daily lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Gal. 5:22-23). This includes controlling anger, toward both our mates and children. Being an example of godliness means that when we sin in word or deed toward our family members, we

humbly confess that sin and seek forgiveness, both from God and from the ones we wronged. It means that we walk in daily, moment-by-moment submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

(2) *As parents, we should train our children in the ways of the Lord.* This includes leading our children to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and teaching them the commands and principles of Scripture. It includes commitment to a local church, set times for family Bible reading and prayer, and teaching God's ways in spur of the moment opportunities. This kind of instruction is not a nice thing to do if you're so inclined; it is a God-given duty for Christian parents, especially for fathers. We shirk our responsibility as Christian fathers if we are spiritually passive and if we pawn off this duty to our wives or to the church. In some church traditions, the fathers are responsible to catechize their children. I think this is something we Baptists need to consider, where we teach the great doctrines of the faith to our children in the home.

Much more could be said, but I want to devote a few minutes to the question, Should children honor parents who are clearly not worthy of it? And, if so, how?

3. Children should seek to honor parents even if they are not worthy of honor.

The Fifth Commandment does *not* say, "Honor your parents if they deserve it." While it is far easier to honor godly parents, we are still obligated to honor our parents, even if they do not deserve it. I realize that some have had parents who have abused them emotionally, physically, and sexually. Some have had drunken or drug-addicted parents who have selfishly neglected their children. Some have been hated and rejected by their parents. But the command still applies, "Honor your father and mother." Jesus says to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:44), which may include your parents. So even if it is difficult, you must work at it. Briefly, here are three biblical principles that apply:

(1) *Deal with any bitterness and forgive your parents from your heart.* Forgiving those who have sinned against us is not optional. Jesus said that if we do not forgive our fellow men, our heavenly Father will not forgive us (Matt. 6:15). I have trouble fitting that into my theology, but there's no mistaking the fact that Jesus considered

forgiveness a major, mandatory requirement of the Christian life. Granting forgiveness in our hearts does not mean naively restoring trust in the relationship. If your father molested you sexually, forgiving him does not mean trusting your kids to be alone with him. But it does mean rooting out any bitterness toward God, who sovereignly allowed this sin against you, and toward your father who committed it. It also means granting him forgiveness verbally apart from his deserving it the minute he repents (Eph. 4:32). Also, you may have to ask forgiveness for any rebellion or other sins you have committed against your parents, even if they provoked it.

(2) *Demonstrate a godly attitude toward your parents.* Often when young people from a troubled home get saved, they go back home, often with a well-intended zeal in the Lord, but by their attitude they communicate ingratitude and disrespect for their parents and the way they've raised them. They often come across with a spiritual pride that conveys to the parents, "You've been terrible, sinful, worldly people who did not raise me properly. But now I've found the truth, and I've come to set you straight and ask you to repent." When the parents don't respond enthusiastically to this message, the young person snuffles about being persecuted for the sake of righteousness or, even worse, is openly defiant or demeaning toward the parents.

The main way a Christian young person should bear witness to his parents is by a godly attitude of honor and submission, even when your parents do things to mistreat or provoke you. If they ask about the changes they see in your behavior, of course you give the glory to Jesus Christ through sensitive verbal witness. But your main witness should be through your godly attitude.

(3) *Practice deeds of love and kindness toward your parents, even when they mistreat you, with a view to leading them to Christ.* Even if your parents are selfish pagans who treat you like dirt, you are God's main link to them with the gospel. Even if they never respond or respond with meanness, you can be kind and caring toward them. If you live in another city, you can write to them, send them cards or gifts on special occasions, or call and let them know that you're thinking of them and that you care. You certainly should pray often for their salvation, since that is their primary need.

This does not mean that it's necessary to cater to your parents' every demand or give up a life of your own to make them happy. Some parents are very controlling and would not be happy no matter how much you do for them. But still we must not abandon them and we should seek the Lord for ways we can show them His love and kindness.

Conclusion

A Grimm's fairy tale tells about an old man who lived with his son and daughter-in-law because he had no where else to go. The old man's hands trembled. When he ate, he clattered the silverware, often missed his mouth with the spoon, and dribbled some of his food on the tablecloth. The daughter-in-law hated having him there because he interfered with her right to happiness. So she and her husband took the old man gently but firmly and led him to a corner of the kitchen. There they set him on a stool and gave him his food in an earthenware bowl. From then on he always ate in the corner, blinking at the table with wistful eyes.

One day his hands trembled more than usual and he dropped the bowl, which broke. "If you are a pig," said the daughter-in-law, "you must eat out of a trough." So they made him a little wooden trough, and he got his meals in that.

This couple had a four-year-old son they were quite fond of. One night the father noticed the boy playing intently with some bits of wood and he asked what he was doing. "I'm making a trough," he said, smiling for approval, "to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big."

The man and his wife looked at each other for a while and didn't say anything. Then they cried a little. Then they went to the corner and took the old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him in a comfortable chair and fed him his dinner on a plate. From then on nobody scolded him when he clattered or spilled or broke things. (Told by Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*.)

If we dishonor our parents, we will reap dishonor ourselves. More than that, we will undermine the foundations of society. Wherever you're at in life, I ask, "Are you keeping the Fifth Com-

mandment?" If you are, it will go well with you and you will be blessed by God. It is the first commandment with a promise.

Discussion Questions

1. Does a child dishonor abusive parents by reporting them to proper authorities? Why/why not?
2. Does honoring our parents imply never confronting their sins? How can we know what to accept and what to confront?
3. What guidelines apply in determining whether an elderly parent should live with you?
4. What does biblical forgiveness imply in practice?

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