

Honor Your Father and Your Mother

Exodus 20:12

2/3/2013

In our culture, the fashionable thing for many years has been to reject all authority. The only rule is that there are no rules. The motto for Nike shoes is “Just do it.” Others say “if it feels good, do it.” To our culture, anyone who thinks that there are any kind of universal laws or rules is being narrow-minded. Even kids in high school dream up ways to do something against the law, and without being caught. To get away with something, that's the name of the game. Of course, this mind-set is not new. Children have been disobedient to their parents for many generations, going all the way back to Cain. I'm quite sure that Adam and Eve taught their son Cain to love his brother Abel, but Cain did not do so. Thus, when Cain killed his brother, he was not only breaking the sixth commandment, he was also breaking the fifth commandment. There are many other examples in the Bible of people breaking the fifth commandment. In our immediate community, it often takes the form of kids growing up, then leaving the faith and the church for something else. They think that they are breaking free of that narrow Christianity stuff. What is sad is that young people who think that way are plunging straight into slavery of the worst sort. There are consequences for disobeying the fifth commandment, just as there are promises for those who obey it.

The first four commandments are about how we love God. The last six commandments are about how we love our neighbor. The fifth commandment is the first commandment concerning our neighbor, because our parents are almost always the first people we know in life: they are our first neighbors. Furthermore, who our parents are has been ordained by God. We have no choice in that decision. Therefore, this commandment is something of a bridge between loving God and loving neighbor. We will love our neighbors much more if we respect all the authorities that God has set over us. There is a reason for the order of the commandments, and we can see it especially clearly just here.

The important word in the commandment is “honor.” That is a word we do not know in our culture. Honor is not a virtue that is common. What does this word mean? In the original Hebrew, the word has the connotation of weight, and not physical weight! So, for instance, honoring father and mother would mean giving weight to their words, their counsel, their commands. It means give their opinion and commands due weight. In other words, do not brush them aside, or toss them off, treat them lightly, as if they had no weight. It is hard to throw aside anything that is heavy. And we are to regard our parents' words and character as having heaviness. Here is how the rest of Scripture interprets this commandment: “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father” (Lev 19:3); “For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die’” (Mat 15:4). “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.’” (Eph 6:1-3). The words “revere,” “respect,” “honor,” “weight,” “obedience,” and “deference” all come to mind as good synonyms for how we must regard our parents.

Sometimes we think that this commandment is an easy one to obey. However, if we apply the principles of interpretation that we have learned from before to this commandment, we will find that we do not obey this commandment at all. Just as the word “neighbor” means everyone around us, so also the word “parents” means more than just our biological parents. It means all those who have a position of authority over us. We have authorities placed over us in many different arenas of life: school, government, church, and family are the main areas where we are under authority. The Reformed church has always interpreted the word “parents” to mean all those

who have a God-ordained authority over us. So we are to honor our father and mother in school, which means the teachers, the principal, the superintendent. In government, it means that we honor, pray for, and obey, our local, state, and national rulers and representatives. In church, it means the officers of the church. And in family, of course, it means our parents. All of these people in these various areas of life can be called parents. And in all of these areas, then, we owe honor. Everyone is under authority, even those who have authority. So, no one is exempt from owing honor to someone else. If we think of the commandment in this way, we learn that we are very far indeed from obeying this commandment.

Not only is the scope of the recipients of this honor much greater than we might have supposed, but so also is the nature of the obedience required. It is not just outward obedience to this commandment that is required. It is also inward obedience. We are not to honor our superiors with our mouths but then hate them in our hearts. We are to honor them in thought, word, and deed: on the inside just as much as on the outside. We mustn't forget either that every degree of sin in this category is forbidden, while every degree of obedience to this commandment is required.

Well, who is sufficient for these things? Surely, we can realize that none of us keep this commandment. None of us honor our parents as we ought. But there is someone who did. Jesus tells His disciples how He has honored His Father. In John 15, Jesus says this in verse 10: If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain inr told Him to pass on what He had learned. Jesus did that, and so honored His Father. Jesus made an agreement with the Father before the world even began. That agreement had to do with what Jesus would do in order to save His people. Theologians call this agreement the covenant of redemption. It involved Jesus obeying the whole law on behalf of His people. So, He obeyed His Father in everything in order to save us from our sins. And now for us, the commandment is different. It becomes a Gospel promise. How do we honor our Heavenly Father? We honor Him by listening to His voice when He says about Jesus, His is my Beloved Son. Hear elves by keeping the law. It is rather the only way we can be said to have any kind of obedience: when we have faith in Jesus Christ, we have His law-keeping. We have His obedience to His Father. Jesus' obedience to the Fifth Commandment can be described as our salvation. As Philippians 2 says, Jesus was obedient, even to the point of death. When it says there that He was obedience, it means that He was obedient *to his Father* up to the point of death. And we are the ones who receive that obedience as a free gift. It is salvation itself, to entrust ourselves to the great Shepherd of the sheep.

Once we have honored our heavenly Father by putting our trust in His Son, what does honoring our earthly parents look like in life? For children, it means obeying their parents in the Lord, for this is right, as Paul says in Ephesians 6. For older children, including teenagers, it means not sassing your parents, but doing what they command, even if *you* think they're being *sooo* stupid! For twenty-somethings, it means asking and heeding the advice your parents give you. For middle-aged people, it means providing for the welfare of your elderly parents. After all, they took care of us when we were helpless. We need to take care of them when they are helpless. And we need to do it in such a way as to preserve their dignity of life.

This commandment means honoring everyone who is older. Our culture hates old age. They do everything they can to avoid it, and then when they are faced with it, they make fun of old age. The Bible has a very different perspective on old age. It says that gray hair is the glory of old age. Gray hair speaks of experience and wisdom. All who are younger should honor all those who are older, even if they are not our parents. If an elderly person likes peace and quiet, which they often do, we should be willing to give that to them without making them ask for it. Children should not be rowdy and noisy around elderly people, who seldom appreciate noise. Yes, they do in fact

understand about children having lots of energy. But elderly people often find themselves envying the young when the young are too energetic around them. We need to be sensitive not only to their physical needs and comforts, but also to their spiritual condition and their emotional state. Elderly people love it when young people show affection for them and honor for them, and not treat them as if their life is already done, and now they can be safely ignored. And that is the single best thing we can do for the elderly people in our community, is to show them affection and honor.

Another application bears mentioning at this point. This commandment is not just about how we treat those in authority over us. It also has to do with how we treat those over whom we have authority. There is never to be any tyranny, but instead love and understanding.

To close, we need to look at the promise just briefly. The promise is that we will live long in the land the Lord our God is giving us. This was a promise made to ancient Israel. It does not primarily refer to our land here today. The promise of the land to ancient Israel was fulfilled in the church in the New Testament. So, to live long in the land today means to live long in the church. And maybe, just maybe, we should think of the church as our mother. Honoring our biological parents means also that we will honor our spiritual mother, the church. And I know our Heavenly Father wants us to do that.