

Honour your mother and your father

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Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20.12 – 13).

Introduction

We come now to the fifth of the Ten Commandments, the command for us to honour our father and our mother. The commandment is found in Exodus 20 verse 12 which reads: "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." Whatever doubts you may have about the continuation of the Sabbath, there can be no doubt that this commandment is one which continues to be binding upon all, because it is directly quoted by both the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul (Matthew 15.4, Ephesians 6.2).

Moreover, as with the laws about idolatry and the Sabbath, this law was reinforced with the death penalty in the Old Testament period. Here is a command which is recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 18 to 21:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.

As we noted last week, we do not still have the death penalty under the New Covenant for breaches of the moral law. But the fact that this law was enforced by the death penalty under the Old Covenant shows how important it is God's

sight.

As we think about this commandment, I wish to do so under the following headings:

1. What this commandment teaches children
2. Why children should honour their parents
3. How parents can help their children to obey the commandment

1. What this commandment teaches children

We start then with what the commandment teaches children. I wish to divide what I say on this subject between what it says to those who are young children, still living at home under the authority of their parents, and those who are adult children who have grown up and may have moved away from home.

1) Young children

As regards young children, it is worth noting at the outset that God directly addressed children from the mountain. There is every reason to believe that children were there at the mountain, along with their parents, and that they will have heard God giving this commandment to them directly. So the fact that God addresses children shows that he considers children to be capable of religious understanding, and also that he holds children responsible for obeying his law. This is reinforced by the fact that God commanded the Israelites to teach the law to their children (for example, Deuteronomy 7.7). We also know that children were in the crowds who listened to the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 18.2). The apostles also directly addressed children in their letters (for example Ephesians 6.1). So, parents, bring your children to church. Encourage them to listen. Teach them the Bible at home. And children, do not think that knowing and obeying God through Jesus Christ is something only for adults. You can and should know Jesus as your saviour, and obey him in your life. The sooner you trust him as your saviour and learn to obey him, the better your life will be. Read your Bible. Willingly join your Mum and Dad when they call you to have a family prayer time, or suggest it to them if you do not already have one. Come to church willingly, and listen hard while you are in church.

So God says to children that they are to honour their parents. Children, how are

you to honour your parents?

By obeying them. The apostle Paul says in Colossians chapter 3 verse 20 "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." Whatever your mother or father tell you to do, you should do it, unless they tell you to do something which is forbidden by God's Word. That obedience should be immediate, not after the third or fourth time of being told, and not only when you are threatened with punishment. You should obey whether your parents are watching you or not. Paul said to slaves that they should obey their masters "in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (Colossians 3:22). And you should obey whether you think it is fair or not; whether or not you think your brothers and sisters have been pulling their weight; whether or not you think your parents are good parents; whether or not your parents are Christians; whether or not your parents exasperate you. We shall see in a while that parents have a heavy responsibility not to exasperate their children. But even if you have parents who do exasperate you a great deal, you still have a responsibility before God to honour and obey them.

By not arguing with your parents. If your parents tell you to do something do it without complaining or arguing. Paul said to believers, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:14 – 15). He also said that slaves should not "to talk back to" their masters (Titus 2:9). If slaves should not talk back to their masters, neither should children talk back to their parents. Your parents should not have to have a confrontation with you every time they tell you to do something. If you believe your parents are mistaken in some policy or some decision, you should speak about it with them quietly at an appropriate moment, and humbly put forward your point of view with proper respect. If they are not persuaded, then unless the decision is directly contrary to Scripture, you should submit to it, even if you still believe it to be mistaken.

By not being sullen or sour in your obedience. Obedience is not real obedience if, though you are outwardly doing what you have been told to do, you have a sulky and miserable manner. Paul says that slaves should serve their masters "wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men" (Ephesians 6:7). So, children, you should obey their parents willingly and

wholeheartedly, as if it were Jesus who had given you the instruction.

By showing respect in your “body language”. There is a way of showing contempt for our parents with our body, even when outwardly you are obeying, for example by looking up into your eye-lids or by going “tut” with our tongue or sighing in a rude way.

By showing respect to your parents in your speech. You should never insult anyone, nor be rude, because all people are made in the image of God. If you should not be rude to anyone, how much more should you not be rude to your own parents?

By not speaking evil of your parents. We should not speak evil of any person. James says “Do not speak evil of another” (James 4.11, New King James Version). We should not repeat the wrong that someone has done unless it is necessary to protect someone else from being harmed by them. It has been said, “If you cannot say anything good about someone, do not say anything at all about him.” If this is true for all men, how much more is it true for our own parents? Your mother or your father may have behaved atrociously, either to you or someone else. Is any good going to be done by repeating this to another person? If not, keep quiet about it.

By defending the reputation of your parents as much as it can be honestly defended. If someone makes a disparaging remark about your parent which is untrue, say it is untrue. If it cannot be honestly denied, look for some other way of honouring parent’s reputation. Admit that your parent has his or her faults, but highlight his or her virtues.

2) *Adult children*

What then about children who have grown up and become adults in their own right? How are they to relate with their parents? Most parents will recognise that their children over a certain age have responsibility for making their own decisions in life, and will not try to make decisions for them. So in this sense the command to “obey” one’s parents no longer applies for grown-up children. Nevertheless, children who have grown to be adults should still honour their parents. Here are some examples as to how this is to apply:

By showing proper courtesy and respect to parents. The great King Solomon, when his mother came to see him, “stood up to meet her” and “bowed down

to her" (1 Kings 2:19). The requirement to honour your parents and to be respectful and polite to them, and to defend their reputation and not to speak evil of them, does not diminish as you and they get older.

By respecting house rules if you are still living at home. If you were to rent a place to live, you would have to sign a contract which laid down rules as to what you are and are not allowed to do in your accommodation. If you would do this for a landlord, why not obey the house rules if you are still living at home?

By listening to advice. You may not have to obey your parents any more in the strict sense, but you will be wise to discuss any major decision with your parents. They have many more years experience of life than you do, and in any case, it will be showing honour to them to involve them in your decision. "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke" (Proverbs 13.1).

By providing for the needs of aged parents. The time when Jesus quoted this commandment was when he was criticising the Pharisees for the fact that they made religious excuses for neglecting their responsibility to care for their aged parents. He said to them,

Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honour your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honour his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:3 - 6).

It is clear from what Jesus said that to provide for one's aged parents is honour them. The person who failed to provide for his parents was breaking the commandment to honour one's father and mother.

The need to provide for aged parents is also taught by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy chapter 5. He says there that if a widow has children or grandchildren these relations should "learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God." (verse 4). He says that "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he

has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (verse 8).

In the light of this we should provide for the practical needs of aged parents. This may involve, where it is practically possible, having the aged parent(s) to live in the family home. Even if this is not possible, as parents grow older we need to allow time to visit them and help them practically.

2. Reasons why children should honour their parents

I want us now to consider together why children should honour their parents. There are two main reasons of which I am aware:

1) Out of respect for God

All power and authority that exists in the world has been created by God. There is no power that exists that God has not made. This applies to parental authority as much as all other authority.

We know that, as regards the State, God has created the authorities in order to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right. Therefore those who rebel against the authorities that God has instituted are rebelling against God himself. “There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by god. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against God, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves” (Romans 13.1 – 2).

The same thing applies to parental authority. It has been established by God. Your parents have been placed over you by God. Therefore you should submit to what your parents say, because if you do not do so you are rebelling against God himself. Child, are you a Christian? Do you love Jesus? Do you believe that Jesus has paid for your sins by his death on the Cross? Well then, show your love to Jesus by submitting to the parents that Jesus has placed over you. Obey your parents as keenly and as willingly as you would if Jesus himself were telling you what to do.

2) For their own good

God said to the people, “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” The apostle Paul when he

quotes the commandment generalises the promise so that it applies to all men, not just to Jews: “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Ephesians 6.3).

If you honour your parents it will help you to have a long life that goes well for you. It is not hard to see how this happens. If you honour and obey your parents, and listen to their advice, you will be spared from falling into many pitfalls. You may be spared a premature death from making a disastrous decision. You may also be spared from poverty and disaster through making foolish mistakes. God has given you parents so that you can “tap into” their accumulated wisdom. Between them your parents will have at least 36 years of extra experience more than you. You are very foolish if you do not obey your parents when you are young, and still listen to their advice when you are grown up.

3. How parents can help their children to obey this command

Jesus said that those who lead children who believe in him to sin do something which is very serious in his sight. Hear his words which are recorded in Matthew 18.5 – 7:

Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!

If we as parents act in a way which is going to tempt our children to disobey this commandment, then we shall have to give an account to God for this very serious sin. Our children will still be responsible for their sin of failing to honour us, but we will also bear a heavy responsibility. Paul says that parents must not exasperate their children (Ephesians 6.4). In other words, we must not provoke them to sin. He also says “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they may become discouraged” (Colossians 3.19)

How then can those of us who are parents help our children to obey this commandment, and not be a source of stumbling for them? Here are some suggestions:

1) By loving our children

Our children need to know that they are valued and wanted. They need encouragement where they do well. They need to have their physical and emotional needs provided for. When we rebuke our children we must be careful not to insult them or call them names, or make wounding attacks on their character. Such wounds can go very deep and can leave lasting scars. If our children do not feel loved by us, we are going to make it very difficult for them to honour us.

2) By making wise decisions on behalf of our children

We need to seek wisdom from God to make good and wise decisions on behalf of our children. If we make foolish or poorly thought-out decisions, or if we vacillate in our decisions and keep changing our minds, then we will make it difficult for our children to respect us and submit to our lead. We also need, however, to be firm once we have come to a conclusion as to what to do. If our children know that if they make a big enough fuss they can get us to reverse our decisions, we will do them no favours. Rather we will encourage them to be argumentative and disobedient – in other words to be spoilt.

3) By not being hypocritical

You know the old saying that parents sometimes say, “Do what I say and do not do what I do.” Of course this is nonsense. Your children are watching your life very closely. The smallest inconsistency between what you say and what you yourself do will be picked upon, and will be taken by them as an excuse to sin. For example, you say to your child, “Do not shout and lose your temper”, but if you do so yourself your child almost certainly will disobey you, and so break this commandment. You say to your child, “Honour your mother and your father”, but if you yourself are disrespectful to your own parents, they will be disrespectful to you.

Of course, none of us is without sin. But as soon as we become aware of our sin we must repent, and if necessary apologise to our children and seek to repair the damage we have done. If your child points out your sin to you, have the humility to listen to what he says, and turn from your sin. If we persist in sin without repentance we are liable to be a serious cause of stumbling to our children.

4) By disciplining them appropriately

Many in our contemporary society cannot understand how a loving parent can possibly use corporal discipline on his child. They think that such discipline must be by its very nature abusive, and they use emotive words such as “hitting” to describe it. However, far from being cruel and unloving, appropriate discipline is a loving thing to be given to a child. “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Proverbs 13.24). It is actually unloving to withhold discipline from a child. “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod he will not die. Punish him with the rod, and save his soul from death” (Proverbs 23.13 – 14).

But we need to be careful when we discipline our children that we really do so out of love, and not as a way of venting our own personal frustration. We need to be very careful about anger, remembering that “man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1.20). We also need be careful to be consistent, and not to discipline something very harshly one day, and then be indulgent about the next.

5) By teaching them

We need also to help our children to obey this command by teaching them the Bible. Paul says that we are to bring our children up in the “training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6.4). Teach your children the Bible. Bring them to church. When they do wrong, correct them on the basis of God’s Word.

6) By praying for them

Keep on praying for your children. Never give up praying for their conversion, as long as they are alive. You never know what God will do in their lives. Augustine of Hippo was a great Christian preacher in the fifth century, in North Africa. He only became a Christian well into his adult years, after living a worldly life. His mother, Monica, was a godly Christian, and she had been praying for his conversion for many years. The same could be said for Isaac Newton, the writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace”, who was a very wayward young man, but whose mother prayed for him for many years. Pray for your children, no matter how far they wander from the Lord. And once they are converted, keep on praying until Christian character is fully formed in them.

Conclusion

Are you a young child still living at home? If so, are you properly honouring and obeying your parents? Are you now a grown-up child, now perhaps living away from home? Are you honouring your parents as you should? Are you are a parent? Are you doing all you should be doing to help your children to honour you?

Surely all of us will have to admit that we have in many respects failed keep this commandment. What should you do, if you know you have broken this commandment?

The first thing you must do, if you have not done so before, is to be saved from your sin through Jesus Christ. Otherwise, you will have to bear the punishment for your failure to keep this commandment through all eternity.

Then, having believed, go to God every day to receive fresh grace to honour your parents, and to love your children if you have any. He promises that he has given us all we need for life and godliness. Let us come to him and receive from him his help and strength.

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