

Honor your father and mother
Men's Bible Study at Park View
November 8, 2005

Scriptures: Exodus 20:5-6, 12, Ephesians 6:1-4

The first thing that comes to mind for many of us when we hear the fifth commandment is that children should obey their parents. While that is certainly true as an application, it was not likely the primary intent of the commandment given on Mount Sinai. After all, these commandments were addressed to adult Israelites.

Perhaps the primary intent has to do with taking care of the elderly. In an agrarian society without the availability of social services as we know them today, people from the older generation depended upon the younger generation to care for them. A primary way to honor one's father and mother is to arrange for their care in old age.

There are numerous other ways to honor parents as well. It is clear that this commandment was intended to underscore the value of family and inheritance. Notice that there is a promise of long life in the land for those who honor their parents. In commandment two, we are told that God is a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God, but showing love to thousands (of generations) of those who love God and keep his commandments.

We need only to contemplate our belly buttons to observe that as human beings, we owe our lives to our parents. "No matter how old we become, no matter how many children we ourselves may have, we never get over being children of God and our parents" (Hauerwas and Willimon, *The Truth about God*, p. 68). Our parents not only gave us life, but much to accompany it. "The nature of human life is that each generation begins where the previous generation places it." "This is true genetically, physically, sociologically, psychologically, and spiritually," (Seamans, *God's Blueprint for Living*, p. 76). We can never get away from our parents, no matter how hard we try. Rabbi Edwin Friedman once wrote that the family "umbilical cord is infinitely elastic."

It is very common for parents and children to live with tension or conflict between them. On the one hand, parents want to instruct the next generation. They hope to help their children avoid the mistakes they made in their younger years. On the other hand, children seem to think they know more than their parents. Most children think that they could improve on the lives of their parents.

It is interesting to note that nowhere does the Bible command us to love our parents, although we are told to love God, stranger and neighbor. Perhaps the command to honor father and mother helps keep us connected to our parents. We do it because we know that it's right, not because we always feel like it. "The honoring of parents reinforces social order as a whole and enhances the quality of life for everyone involved" (Schlessinger, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 147). There are many Proverbs

that emphasize proper behavior to parents. See, for example, Proverbs 1:8, 6:20-22, 10:1, 15:20, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, and 28:24.

The law prescribed the death penalty for the child who cursed father or mother (Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9). Although Jewish tradition says that this command was never literally carried out, the warning was enough to strike terror into a rebellious child's heart. Perhaps the command to honor our parents is a way to emphasize the importance of submission to authority, as Hauerwas and Willimon imply in the lengthy quotation below:

Hierarchy is built into the ways Jews and Christians live in the world. In honoring mothers and fathers, in submitting to God as the Father, we are trained in a manner of subjection that a democratic society will consider odd. Democracy tends to delude us into thinking that we may live our lives as if no authority need be acknowledged unless it personally suits us. In a democracy we are free to choose to whom we shall submit. We therefore tend to think of God as someone we have chosen, a democratically elected leader, the great liberal benefactor in the sky. No, God is our Creator and the One who has redeemed our lives through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus God is the only one who can demand obedience (p. 75).

The Apostle Paul cited the fifth commandment as a way to encourage children to obey their parents. He noted that this commandment was the only one with a promise attached. Yet we know that there are times when children must disobey their parents in order to honor God. I Samuel 19:1-7 provides such an example; Jonathan rightly disobeyed his father Saul in relation to David. When parents are ungodly, abusive, or mentally troubled, it is only right to seek God's way instead of the parents' misguided way. Parents must never knowingly exasperate their children (Ephesians 6:4).

When the boy Jesus was reprimanded by his parents for seeming disobedience, he replied that he needed to be about his Father's business, yet he submitted to them (Luke 2:41-52). Later Jesus told his would-be followers that they must "hate father and mother" in order to be disciples. Yet Jesus lashed out at the Pharisees for taking what rightly belonged to their parents in order to declare it devoted to God (Matthew 15:1-6). It takes genuine discernment to know how to truly honor one's parents.

In sum: We can say with certainty on the basis of both Testaments that we are called to obey God and honor (respect) our parents. While we may at times experience tension and conflict with our parents, God abundantly rewards those who show them honor and respect. And when we experience patterns of sinful or emotional brokenness in our families, God offers healing and hope through the grace and empowerment of Jesus Christ.

Questions to ponder: Think of some commonly accepted behaviors in our society that clearly do NOT honor parents. Then name some ways that you have honored (or desire to honor) your parents, even if they may no longer be living.