

The Fifth Commandment: Honour Your Father and Your Mother

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you. (Exo 20:12)

Dr. Phil has a programme you can view online, and the theme is "Out of Control Children." On that program, you can watch as an eight year old boy terrorizes his mother and children with verbal and physical abuse, has to be restrained for up to an hour before he calms down, and is on a one-way street to being a criminal. Another boy is 10 years old, and has fits of rage that his parents say are uncontrollable. And so they land up on the Dr. Phil show, seeking help.

That's not uncommon. We now have entire series of programmes, such as Supernanny, where an expert comes in to witness some helpless and often clueless parents with out of control children, who are smashing up the kitchen, throwing their food, swearing at their parents. The expert usually gives some sage advice such as, "You can't let him do that!" or "he needs to have boundaries." And of course there is a viewing audience of millions, who watch these things partly because out-of-control children are great entertainment if you're bored, and partly because many of those viewers are just as clueless, and would like some tips.

I wonder if these kinds of phenomena could have been found in society other than one we are in now – a secular society which has abandoned belief in God, abandoned belief in moral absolutes, and therefore abandoned belief in the goodness of authority. Three thousand years ago, God gave the fifth of the Ten Commandments to Israel, and many would say it is the foundation of any society.

The fifth commandment to honour father and mother moves us into what we call the second table of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were written on two tablets of stone. When we look at them, they do seem to fall into two categories – the first four all have to do with our relationship to our God, and the next six all have to do with our relationship with our neighbour. The first and greatest commandment is to love God, the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour. And it is very significant that at the top of the second table of the Law, the very first thing God draws our attention to regarding our neighbour is to honour father and mother. You would think the command to not murder, or to not commit adultery would come before this one. But no, before God forbids murder, theft, adultery, lying, he positively commands honouring father and mother.

The reason why this is at the top of our neighbour-responsibilities has to do with what it is really commanding. Like we have seen with the others, these commands have more to them than meets the eye. So before you say like the rich young ruler said to Jesus, "all these I have kept from my youth!" let's consider what this command really means. We need to understand why this commandment is so fundamental to humans relating to other humans.

First, I want to consider three reasons why God wants this command to be so central to our thinking. Then I want us to consider three ways we are practise this, under the control of the Holy Spirit.

I. God Wants Us To Revere The Family

The command says simply, "honour your father and your mother." The rest of the verse is a promise, but the actual duty is honour father and mother. The word for *honour* in the Hebrew has the idea of weighty, heavy. We still use that idea in English when we say things like "His words carry weight" or when we say "There is some real gravity to his presence." What we mean is, when someone is important to us, when someone has respect in our lives, we do not lightly dismiss them.

Their words cannot be ignored. Their presence cannot be dismissed.

God says, before anything else, your father, and your mother are to carry weight, stature in your eyes. You are to think of them in your heart, and treat them with your actions in ways that give them a special place of honour, respect, love and admiration.

God is elevating the importance of a rightly-ordered family. He is saying, the backbone of a culture where neighbours love neighbours begins with the family. Charity begins at home, they say, and loving your neighbour begins in the dining room, in the kitchen, in the lounge.

At the very heart of God's plan to redeem the world is a rightly ordered family. Husband and wife that love one another, and thereby love their children, children which honour and obey their parents. God elevates this to primary importance because the family is where He places some of His clearest pictures of who He is and what He is like. Paul tells us that husbands and wives are pictures of Christ and the church. When husbands and wives play their biblical roles, children see the Gospel story: Christ who died to save a bride, a bride who lovingly serves.

When parents play their roles, we have a picture of God's Fatherhood: His loving authority – holiness with grace, firmness with mercy, hard to satisfy, easy to please. In fact, the family itself pictures the Trinity: God the Father, who has a Son, who together love one another and their love is seen and enjoyed in the Third Person, the Holy Spirit.

Tear up, distort and otherwise destroy the family, not only are you going to raise a generation of misfits, but you will raise a generation who struggle to understand what it would mean to have God as Father, to be in the family of God in the church, to love other Christians as brothers, to understand the Gospel of Christ laying down His life for us.

Every time a nation embraces atheism and rejects God, you see their contempt for the family. Whenever atheistic systems gained the place of power, one of the first things they did was to take charge of parenting. Children belong to the State, children must be educated by the State, children must be trained and assimilated by the State to become helpful worker ants for the whole nation. Parents are just the biological production mechanisms to make more worker ants, but then parents must give up their children to the State to educate, to clothe, to medicate. And any parent who does not submit will be punished. In extreme cases, such as in Soviet Russia, children were rewarded if they informed on their own parents, and had their parents arrested.

God gives this commandment to tell us that the human institution that He wants us to respect first of all is the family, not the Government. But lest you think I'm saying respect for Government is optional, let me give you the second reason for the prominence of this command:

II. God Wants us To Respect Authority

Honour father and mother. Who are father and mother? Father and mother are God-appointed authorities. Unless you are orphaned, father and mother are the first authorities you encounter in your life. Father and mother are the first people you meet in life who tell you what to do, and forbid you from doing certain other things. Perhaps the first word a child understands is “no”. God has set it up so that humans come into the world and their very first experience is being dependent on someone who tells you what to do. God made it so that before you can speak you are learning that built into the fabric of this universe is authority and submission.

Who likes the word *authority* anymore? We like the words of the French Revolution: Liberty,

equality, fraternity. But not authority. For us, freedom means autonomy. I get to do what I want, when I want, how I want it. Authority in government is a necessary evil, but I don't really need it.

But if you understand this commandment, you understand that God wants people to respect authority from their earliest ages. Because the universe He has created is filled with authority. Governments have authority over nations. Manager and owners have authority over employees. Policemen have authority to enforce laws. Teachers have authority over learners. Pastors have authority in churches. Husbands have authority over wives. Fathers and mothers have authority over children. This is not a terrible thing. This is God's common grace gift to restrain evil and preserve order in the world. If you hate authority, then you hate the architecture of the universe you are living in.

God wants people to begin to honour authority in their lives, beginning from parents, but then extending to all legitimate, God-appointed authority in the world.

Meet Andy Anarchist. Andy got into a pattern of defying authority from before he could speak. His parents believed it would hurt his self-image if they checked him or disciplined him, so he grew up in a home telling his parents what he wanted to do and not do, pouring contempt on them, complaining about what he didn't like, and scorning them to other people, sometimes in front of other people. He did much of the same at school, where his teachers were not allowed to perform any kind of discipline upon him, and he laughed at the kinds they could. He entered his twenties and begrudgingly accepted a job under a manager, but did his best to show how much he hated it. He did his best to undermine his boss. He would disobey laws, and when he was pulled over, he bribed the police.

Now imagine going to Andy and saying to him, "There is an Authority over all the universe. He is in charge, and He punishes evil. You will never get away with anything with Him, and He cannot be mocked, bribed, or dismissed." Do you think Andy will believe you? Will he tremble at the thought of the ultimate authority? No, because Andy has never really experienced authority. He will never fear God, except by God's gracious intervention, because no one ever taught him to reverence anything.

God places this command at the top of the second table of the Law because he wants us to revere the God-ordained family; He wants us to respect God-given authority. These become pictures of Him. But there is still a third reason why this command has the prominence it does.

III. God Wants Us To Recognise Aged Wisdom

Honour your father and your mother. Your father and your mother represent learning, experience and wisdom in advance of yours. Some evolutionists want to tell us we are animals in every way. A dog is able to have puppies in the first year of its life. A cat can have kittens within 6 months. It is no accident that not only do humans become biologically able to reproduce at a much later age, but the way human society is set up, you cannot have a stable family until you are into your twenties or thirties. Yes, I understand we are biologically capable earlier, but that's why we refer to teen pregnancies as a problem: people who cannot support children financially, and are not emotionally ready to be parents.

This is no accident. God has set it up so that parents have a head-start on their children of a few decades. What happens in those decades? You learn, hopefully. You acquire knowledge about God, the world, yourself, and the human condition. You gain wisdom. And when this little eating and crying machine comes into the world, you know quite a bit more, and have learned quite a bit more

than he or she has. People come into this world not as fully-formed adults, not as independent creatures who grow out of the ground, but as needy, weak, small, ignorant people who are dependent on these older humans to provide for them and to instruct them, and you have a head-start of many years.

In fact, in one sense, your children never catch up, as long as you are alive. Because that twenty, thirty, forty year head-start remains, and you keep learning, as they learn the lessons you have already learned, and pass the ground you covered a few decades ago.

Is this an accident? No. God wishes this command to teach children to honour and respect the wisdom of age, and experience. In honouring father and mother, a young person says, "I do not know it all. My parents have learned and gained experience long before I came along. I need to trust and honour that. I need to be teachable at the feet of those older than me.

If you read the book of Proverbs, you will hear this theme again and again. Solomon writes to his son, and he uses the words "My son" 23 times. Solomon wants his son to know that he has received this wisdom from others and now he passes it on: *"Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, And give attention to know understanding; 2 For I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law. 3 When I was my father's son, Tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, 4 He also taught me, and said to me: 'Let your heart retain my words; Keep my commands, and live. (Pro 4:1-4)*

This attitude goes beyond parents. It goes to respecting older wisdom, whether it is the wisdom of grandparents, whether it is the wisdom of people who have already died, but written down their wisdom in books. It goes to respecting those Christians who passed on to us a treasure-trove of writing and thinking.

We don't live in a world which honours the wisdom of experience very much. The tag-line on products is "new and improved", not "old and the same." We are now in an age where we live for updates – what's new in my inbox, what is the latest post on Facebook, what is the newest tweet, the newest blog post, what is the latest fashion, the latest version of the software, the latest model of the car, or the gadget. So there is a drive to novelty, newness.

Technology reinforces this idea. The forty-something year old fumbles around with the new gadget, and his ten-year old nephew picks it up and sorts it out in a moment. This sends a message to the ten-year old: older people don't get it. They can't figure out the latest and greatest technology. In other words, today's culture teaches youth that they are ahead, and that older people are behind.

But honouring the wisdom of experience is exactly the reverse. It is saying: my parents are ahead of me, I have much to learn. My spiritual fathers in the faith are ahead of me, I need to honour and listen. Those who lived and died for Christ 1000 years ago are not behind me because they are in the past, they are in advance of me because of the kind of sacrifices they made, the wisdom they gleaned, the lessons they learned. I need to listen and learn, not scoff and scorn.

How can you expect to believe God and love Him if you scorn what is old and belongs to an older time when what He has said is written in a book which is 3000 years old, and which has been taught and practised by a family which is now 2000 years old? No: honour your father and mother: respect the wisdom of experience, the wisdom of the ages.

The importance of this commandment is not merely that children need to have good manners at table. No, God is showing what is really important: a rightly-ordered family that reflects him, a profound respect for authority because He is the ultimate authority, and a deep respect for aged

wisdom, because He has revealed Himself in an old book that has been taught and lived out by a 2000 year old church.

So we understand why this is so important to God. How do we go about implementing it?

The responsibility for this commandment is split in two. It is obvious that a child is the one who is to honour father and mother. But you may have noticed that children do not instinctively do this. So who does the commandment fall back on? It falls to parents to teach their children what honouring is, to supervise that it takes place, and then to correct when it doesn't. And then it falls to all of us to keep practising this in our own lives.

I. We Must Teach and Require Reverence at Home

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. (Eph 6:1)

Parents, teach your children to obey. What is obedience? As we have said before, and as Ted Tripp reminds us, obedience is immediate, first-time and cheerful. If obedience is not immediate, then during that delay, the child is disobeying. If obedience doesn't happen on the first or second command, and the parent has to repeat himself several times – what is the child doing on each of those repetitions? If obedience is begrudging, reluctant and done with a sour attitude, what does God say of that kind of obedience?

We are trying to teach our children what it is to obey God. When God commands, we should obey immediately, first-time, and cheerfully.

So when your children do not obey in that way, they have disobeyed, and it is time to take them aside and bring them back into God's universe. You explain to them that they did not obey. You explain to them that God has commanded that they obey parents, so they have not only disobeyed you, they have disobeyed God. You tell them that God has commanded you to correct and discipline them, and that you would be disobeying God if you don't. You correct them, not to harm or injure, but to teach and remind. Then you tell them to put it right with God, and with you. You pray, you reconcile, and you say no more about it. And, particularly when your children are very young, you repeat that process about fifty times in the day.

But it is more than just obedience. It is honour. We have to teach our children to treat us with respect. That means appropriate titles. It means please and thank you. It means not interrupting. It means giving us eye-contact when we speak to them. It means they show appropriate gratitude. It means not sighing or complaining or huffing and puffing when given a chore.

Your child does not naturally give you respect. It has to be taught, and required, while you wait for the day that they will repent, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, receive a new heart, and the Holy Spirit, and be empowered to revere and respect you from the inside out. But you don't let them become a bunch of raucous hyenas in your home until that day. You insist upon proper honour.

I know that it appears self-serving to require another person to honour you. I know you want to leave it to them to come to respect you. But I am telling you on the authority of the Word of God "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child." If you are worried about seeming to be self-serving, then who are you really worried about? If you are concerned about appearing self-aggrandising, then what are you really concerned about? Believe it or not, when this controls you, it is not humility but pride. Your image is uppermost in your mind. Humble yourself, serve your children, by requiring them to honour you. It is one of the most loving things you can do for them: teach them what reverence is.

If you are an adult, you continue to honour your parents. The relationship of submission changes, because once you are married, or once you are financially self-supporting, that relationship is not the same. But there ought always to be a relationship of gratitude, of affection, of respect. In fact, in the later years, that honouring sometimes becomes financial, as children take up the support of an aged parent. In fact, 1 Timothy 5 requires this, and says that a widow who cannot support herself must be cared for by her children.

II. We must Teach and Require Respect For Authority

It is interesting that in almost every culture, the word father and mother has been extended to other authorities. In South Africa, many cultures call adult men *gogo* or *baba*, and adult women *mama*. In fact, the English word sir, comes from old English sire, and sire is a parent, someone who sires another.

When your children honour father and mother at home, they have not exhausted all their responsibilities to show honour.

Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. (1Pe 2:17)

Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed. (1Ti 6:1)

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. (1Ti 5:17)

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Rom 13:7)

Whether it is our children's teachers, pastors, coaches, whether it is officials, shopkeepers, neighbours, other adults, the elderly, children can learn to use titles of respect, to speak with courtesy, to consider them. It takes a lot of coaching, and a lot of reminding, and a lot of correcting, but the issue here is not just that others will think your children are well-mannered. It is that your children understand that authority in the world is not a necessary evil, it is good, and to be honoured.

One of the ways you do that is by not undermining other authorities. When a parent speaks evil, either of the other parent, or of a teacher, or another adult, or an official, it undermines all authority. It says to the child, "You do not have to honour authority if you don't like it, or if you don't agree with it."

Model respect yourself in the presence of the authority and out of it, and our children will pick it up. Children who call adults "Hey you" and do not greet, express gratitude, or yield obedience do so typically because they never see respect, and it is never required of them.

One day, if God is gracious, your child will repent and believe, and learn the fear of the Lord from within. But in the meantime, set the stage, lay the table, arrange the furniture of reverence.

III. We Must Teach and Require Respect For Experience and Wisdom

16 Thus says the LORD: "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls. (Jer 6:16)

Ask for the old paths. Search out wisdom. Learn from experience.

I don't remember being a child or a teenager and naturally feeling like I wanted to learn from my elders. Mark Twain made the statement, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years." Every youth on the Earth feels he has it figured out by himself. Every child and young person is sure that their vigour and strength is a sign that they know what they need to know. Just like obedience and respect needs to be taught, teachability needs to be taught. Humility about what you know needs to be taught.

Teach teachability. Teach children to love established wisdom. Teach children to love not what is new and relevant, but what is established and permanent. Teach them to love the Word of God. Teach them to love church history, and the saints of years gone by.

Do that yourself. Honour our Christian forebearers. Listen to them. Read them. Consider what they did, why they did it, and how they did it before you dismiss it.

The command ends with a promise. What is the promise? *that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.*

God promises a good life, a longer life to those who will love this command. If you wish to cut your days short, disobey and despise your parents, reject all authority in your life, and scorn experience and wisdom.