

10 Commandments – 5 – Honor Your Father and Mother

Exodus 20:1-12

¹Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ¹⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

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There are times and places where scripture is exacting in its counsel:

Noah's ark is to be made according to exacting dimensions.

Temple practice is described in detail.

When someone sins against you, Jesus said, go to the person.

And then there are the principles we are given that we are called to discern (not to manipulate to our own gain) what is good and right and true. Such it is with the fifth commandment: honoring father and mother.

Perhaps that is important to mention because some of us gathered here feel most blessed by our parents. Others, however, bear the emotional scars of counterproductive parenting.

In his autobiography, actor Alan Alda who played Hawkeye on M*A*S*H, tells the story of speaking at his mother's funeral. He tried to speak with emotion, but what came out was ambivalence for her apparent schizophrenia and self-medication with alcohol.

It may be with similar ambivalence that you engage the fifth commandment today.

To those who have had wonderful parents whose memory is a source of joy and to those who remember with sorrow, we explore the fifth commandment that comes with a blessing.

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As we've previously noted, the commandments appear in the Bible both in Exodus and in Deuteronomy. In Exodus the father appears first and in Deuteronomy the mother appears first. Clearly Scripture acknowledges that for some, honoring mother is easier and other honoring father comes naturally. Scripture calls us to honor both of our parents.

Joan Chittister finds this commandment is sorely needed in our culture where we often live at a distance from one another, where ageism threatens to rob us of accumulated life wisdom and where we suffer from what she calls the *terminal disease of immediacy*.² This commandment refuses to discard yesterday in favor of today and it reminds us of the other when we are tempted to glorify our self.

Writer after writer acknowledges that the commandments were written for adult Israelites and that this commandment is not just about getting children to obey their parents – although it does speak to that. It is more expansive.

While the first tablet of commandments focused on love of God, this commandment begins the second tablet of loving one another. And we notice that the second table focuses on family.

Walter Harrelson describes the context in which a community of faith hears this commandment:

*The family gives us life, supports us in life, trains us for life, heals our wounds, eases our pain, loves and accepts us no matter what we do. Who can live without family? Even so, perhaps because of the closeness and the intimacy of family relationships, no wounds are so deep as those inflicted by loving/hating family members, no arguments so lasting and bitter as family arguments, and no exploitation so humiliating and unbearable as that by a family member.*³

² Joan Chittister, *The Ten Commandments*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2007, p. 55

³ Walter Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2006, p. 48

Many have acknowledged that our society's foundational unit is the family. The stronger families are the stronger society will be.

But this commandment that hinges between the commandments focused on love for God and those that focus on love for one another also acknowledges that we know God as *Father* and *Mother*. John Calvin and other interpreters of this scripture acknowledge that we have life because our parents participated in God's creating. Conceiving us was an act of our earthly parents and our heavenly parent.

And additionally, we learn from loving our parents something of how we love God. We learn that our parents gladly can say "yes" to us, but that sometimes love means saying "no" or "not yet".

I remember a phase of life where my behaviors caused my father to be a more active parent than he may have wished. More than once he said what many of you have heard (and said) "I do this because I love you."

At the time, I was not sure how true it was and how much it was a justification for doing something that I did not want. In time, however, I've come to understand that a parent is called to oppose a child in love and for love. And that teaches us something about the way that God leads us and why, in mystery, God does not always say "yes" to us.

So this commandment that bridges between love for God and love for one another focuses us on family, particularly our parents. In a memorable way it says simply "honor your father and mother" but what does it mean? Historically, the commandment has guided us to gratitude, obedience, and support.

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Gratitude

That we can most fully understand this commandment as adults can be seen in the number of times that we gained insights into our parents' actions by the situations of our own families. Take one example: the sex talk. Many people find that their parents were not as helpful as they would have hoped in teaching on matters of sexuality. Then in speaking to our children or nieces or nephews we realize the complexities of the whole subject. One has to assess:

- What the child already knows
- What will be helpful to the child?
- What is beyond their ability or interest to know?

As we inherit the responsibility for this instruction with our children, we realize it is not easy to have the sex talk.

Likewise, many children today do not understand parents concern over drugs and alcohol. To younger children, drugs and alcohol are easily accessible, drugs and alcohol are widely used, and to many drugs and alcohol make them feel good (or, in some cases, normal).

But parents see time and again lives destroyed by addictions and the hard road to recovery necessary after a habitual use of drugs and alcohol.

Parents bring us into this world and teach us about life. Parents are sinners like everyone else so we can expect that they will fall short of the glory of God. But fundamentally, they have given us a life orientation from which we grow and mature as adults.

Peter Ustinov once said, “parents are the bones on which children sharpen their teeth”.⁴

And so, we can relate to our parents with gratitude for what they have given us, imperfect though their gift may have been.

In what ways are you like your mother? In what ways are you like your father?

How have the imperfections of your father shaped your values? How have the weaknesses of your mother guided you?

We honor our fathers and mothers by our gratitude: with God they gave us life and gave us enduring life lessons.

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Obedience

Another way of honoring our parents is *obedience*.

In his Institutes of the Christian Religion John Calvin speaks of the importance of obeying our parents as schooling in obeying God. He wrote,

Now this precept of subjection [to our parents] strongly conflicts with the depravity of human nature which, swollen with the longing for lofty position, bears subjection grudgingly. Accordingly, God has put forward as an example that kind of superiority

⁴ Quoted in Joan Chittister, The Ten Commandments, p. 60

*which by nature most amiable and least invidious, because he could thus more easily soften and bend our minds to the habit of submission. By that subjection which is easiest to tolerate, the Lord therefore gradually accustoms us to all lawful subjection, since the reason of all is the same.*⁵

I remember visiting my father when he was confined to a recliner. He passed time by watching television. I remember one afternoon hoping to watch something that interested me. It was then that he gave me a verbal synopsis of the programs that he watched daily and none of them were of any interest to me.

I honored my father that day by watching what he wanted to watch never realizing that faithfulness to the fifth commandment was teaching me something about faithfulness to God.

It seems no giant leap to God's counsel –

*⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*⁶

I was somewhat resistant to this “obey your parents” line of thought in Calvin until I read his reference to the Scripture

Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*, for this is right.⁷

There Calvin remarks that a key parenting function is to train a child how to love God. To the extent that our parents are reflecting the love and purposes of God, we are to obey them. But when their will is fallen or distorted, there ought to be no conflict between what our righteous God calls us to be and do and any unrighteous demands from our parents.

At times, I have seen at funerals, where the parent is angry at a family member and whether spoken or communicated effectively without words, the expectation is that the rest of the family will shun that person. Clearly, it seems to conflict with the expectations that Jesus has taught of going to the person, addressing the sin, and seeking to regain a brother or a sister.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, VIII, 35

⁶ Philippians 4:8-9

⁷ Ephesians 6:1

We are called to obey our parents and learn from that relationship more fully our call to obey God. The exception is when our parents' sinfulness gets in the way of the righteousness of God.

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Finally, support. This commandment was vitally important in times before retirements and social security payments. But today, as parents live longer and the medical system grows more challenging to navigate, support for parents as a way of honoring them is crucial.

Parents often need support as they face the challenges of doctor visits and medical tests. The billing issues alone make me hope that my children will be there for me when I advance into that stage of life.

So many need help managing their affairs.

More challenging may be that many parents outlive their generation and their close friends. That brings a certain isolation that is compounded when physical decline makes it less likely to make new friends or to be active in the world.

Many children find that the roles change and that they become the ones who provide guidance and encouragement to their parents.

One of the many blessings our congregation has to offer is the example of so many who are honoring their parents by providing support to them in their advanced years.

Visiting, reliving past events and relationships, being active in appropriate ways, sharing in the challenges, bringing the outside world in and using the gifts of the parent in creative ways.

For those of us who have high demand lives and find it hard to manage such support, I want to remind you that your children are learning from you how you are caring for your parents. Last fall when I made the hard decision to put down our family dog, I was very clear with my two sons that I realized that they way in which I treated the dog was an example of how I hoped to be treated by them should I ever get to such a stage.

Clearly, in honoring our parents by supporting them in their later years is one way in which we live out God's compassion for us and give tangible expression to God's concern and provision for us.

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Honoring our parents is one of God's commandments for us. It also can provide important healing.

In his autobiography, Alan Alda wrote about his father's tendency to control. Traveling in a caravan of cars, the elder told his son to stay very close. And Alan commented that he dutifully got into his car and followed closely the entire trip with resentment.

During his time with M*A*S*H Alan had opportunity to write some of the episodes and so he wrote about his father's control in the context of a fellow surgeon. The two surgeons competing for control ended up on the front line where they happened to be injured: one in the right arm and one in the left. They ended up using their two good arms to provide an emergency surgery.

The part of the surgeon competing with Alda was his father. And the moment when they worked together was a breakthrough in how they could live their remaining years together.

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These are major ways in which we can be faithful to the fifth commandment. There are many others:

Honoring our parents in the way that we tell family stories.

Using the time we have to understand our parents and the factors that shaped their lives and their behaviors.

Staying connected when distance or time make that a challenge.

Being honest and respectful to our parents.

Being healthy and encouraging their physical, emotional and spiritual health.

For the good of our parents and for modeling for our children and for learning how we are to love God, God commands that we would honor our Father and Mother.

Whether they are living or have passed from this life, our parents remain with us. How will you honor your father and mother?