

Honor Your Parents

How appropriate that on Fathers' Day we should come in our series on the Ten Commandments to the fifth: "Honor your father and your mother." One might think that a single verse of only 23 words would make for a short sermon; however, in one volume I consulted there were over 100 pages of material in four chapters on this one verse! Nevertheless, in only four words of this verse, we can answer four questions that are critical not only for understanding it but also for practicing it.

Exodus 20:12

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

- I. **"HONOR" (answers the question "WHAT?" we are to do)**
 - A. **Imperative.** As Ted Koppel said in his commencement address at Duke University in 1987, God gave humanity ten commandments, not ten suggestions!
 - B. **Imposing.** The root meaning of the Hebrew word for "honor" is "weighty." As 1 Samuel 2:30 clarifies, "Those who honor me, I will honor, but those who despise me will be lightly regarded."
 - C. **Impressive.** This verb stands out in the Ten Commandments as introducing the lone positively stated commandment. (The fourth commandment seems positive rather than negative at first, but the way we "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" is by "doing NO work.") The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 99, provides principles for proper interpretation of the Ten Commandments, and it very helpfully maintains, "where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded." Furthermore, we should be glad that most of the commandments are stated negatively, since our freedom is much greater if God only tells us what we should not do rather than prescribing every single thing we may do!
- II. **"AND" (answers the question "WHOM?" we are to honor)**
 - A. **Conjunction.** It is helpful to recognize that God said "and" here rather than "or." Father and mother ought not be played off against one another, but instead they should be a unified team in raising the children.
 - B. **Counter-cultural.** For all we hear today about how "patriarchal" and primitive ancient Israel was, it is perhaps surprising that this commandment has this "and." Even a thousand years after the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Roman Empire gave full authority and power in the home to the father only. In Israel God honored mothers as well, even sometimes listing the mother before the father (Leviticus 19:3).
 - C. **Comprehensive.** Another of the principles of interpretation for the Ten Commandments in Question 99 of the Larger Catechism is "that under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded." In other words, under these Ten Commandments all other commandments in the Law may be subsumed. As 1 Peter 2:13 says, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution." When Question 124 of the Catechism asks, "Who are meant by father and mother in the fifth commandment?" it answers, "not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth." Furthermore, "father and mother" refer to those we honor by virtue of their position and not only if they are honorable in their persons (character). When Paul received unjust treatment in his trial, he reacted strongly, but retreated respectfully when he realized that the person he had insulted was actually the high priest (Acts 23:3-5).

III. **“THAT” (answers the question “WHY?” we should obey the commandment)**

- A. **Long.** The promise of long life has both individual and corporate dimensions to it. It is generally the case (but not universally, as we know from the book of Job and from John 9 where Jesus teaches about the man born blind) that obedience to this commandment will result in long life for the one obeying. It is also generally the case that the civilization that honors legitimate authority will long endure through history.
- B. **Land.** In the Old Testament the promise of a particular land for the people of God was a shadowy representation for the New Testament truth that “the meek shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Paul understood that Abraham was not merely to inherit the land of Palestine but rather that he would be “heir of the world” (Romans 4:13).
- C. **Live.** The promise of abundant life is particularly annexed to this commandment, such that Paul can say it is “the first commandment with a promise” (Ephesians 6:2). The Puritan Thomas Watson observed that the second commandment also has a promise, but it is a general promise of mercy, whereas here the promise is particular (long life). Watson also notes that this commandment is not only the first with a promise but also the worst with threats. Based on the very severe judgments pronounced against those who violate this commandment (e.g., Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Proverbs 30:17), Watson observes, “Disobedient children stand in a place where all God’s arrows fly.”

IV. **“LORD” (answers the question “HOW?” we can obey this and any commandment)**

- A. **Proper noun.** Whereas “God” is the generic name for “that being greater than which cannot be conceived,” “LORD” (all CAPS in most modern English translations) is the name of the particular God of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the great I AM of Exodus 3 and 6 and John’s seven “I am” statements by Jesus.
- B. **Personal.** This God wants a personal relationship with His people. Of the 23 words in this verse, five of them are “you” or “your.”
- C. **Previously mentioned.** This personal name for the one true and living God, Yahweh, has been given before in this chapter, at the very beginning. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). This preface to the Ten Commandments supplies the grace of this passage and explains why evangelical theologians stress “the indicative before the imperative,” a pattern that is also seen in all of Paul’s letters. Biblical religion begins with the grace of God, who delivers us from our bondage to sin; it then results in our obedience to Him in light of His mercies (Romans 12:1; Ephesians 4:1). All other religions begin with the responsibility of human beings to obey in order to merit God’s favor in response.

Conclusion

As we move from speaking generally of how anyone can obey this commandment (only through the LORD who is the vine and we the branches, John 15) to speaking specifically, a helpful passage to guide our application is Esther 6. The creativity and careful thought of Haman in answering the king’s question, “What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” (Esther 6:6) should guide us all in formulating an answer to that question for us today. *May we all recommit ourselves to honoring the LORD our God by honoring those he tells us to honor with the gracious*

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power he provides (Romans 10:5-8). May we make our applications specific by answering the following questions.

Discussion Questions

1. **What** do you think “honoring” someone should look like in our context today? “What should be done to the one the LORD wants to honor?”

2. **Whom** do you think the LORD would have you honor specifically this week in application of this commandment—natural father or mother, a teacher, a public servant, a spiritual leader, an employer, or some other person in authority over you?

3. **Why** are you especially motivated to keep this commandment this week?

4. **How** will you as a Christian be able to keep this commandment in a different way than you ever could before you were born again and put your faith in Christ?

5. **(Overall)** In which of the following areas do you need particularly to concentrate your meditation and application on this commandment this week?
 - a. Your understanding
 - b. Your will
 - c. Your affections
 - d. Your words
 - e. Your works
 - f. Your gestures
 - g. Ceasing something
 - h. Beginning something

You may want to read the Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 99 and 123-133, for further ideas on how to understand and practice this commandment.