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Exodus 20:12

Thirty-fourth Message

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THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT: HOLY HONOR TO PARENTS

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Our Exodus studies have brought us to the fifth word which God gave to Israel at Mt Sinai. In a world replete with idolatry, all the nations surrounding Israel worshiped gods they could see and touch and feel. By contrast, Israel was told in the first four commandments to give her supreme devotion to the Creator God they could not see. Yet as creatures we are made up of flesh as well as spirit, so how do holy affections find tangible expression on earth? Where can we find the face of God on earth? The fifth word, the command to give honor to our parents, relieves the tension.

I. The Basis for Honoring Parents

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. (Exod 20:12 NASB)

- a Primary relationship: Child → parents integration
 - b Length of time: time made sacred
 - b' Permanency of place: land
- a' Primary relationship: God → child

This commandment serves as a bridge in the Decalogue which welds together the human and divine aspects in all our relationships. From the simple structure of the commandment (above) we observe that it integrates our primary relationships (God and parents) with time and space (land). This keeps holy affections from being ethereal, with no anchor points on earth. The first four commandments focus on loving and honoring a God in heaven whom we cannot see; the remaining six put flesh and bone to all that has been said thus far by commanding that love and honor be given to those made in God's image, in this case parents.

Parents are a child's first tangible connection with God. As God brought Adam to life with his self-giving Spirit, and then instructed him in the garden, so too parents give birth to their children. Then, in a covenant community they are instructed to be the voice of God to their children (Deut 6:4-6, 20-25), instructing them in all that is just, pure and right. Like God, parents are to create a loving environment that feeds, strengthens and nurtures children at great sacrifice to themselves. Eugene Peterson comments:

What human experience is more analogous to being children of God than having parents? We are introduced into giving reverence and honor to God whom we cannot see by honoring parents whom we can see... Life with others takes place in the conditions (primarily persons) that are given to us, not conditions we choose. And nothing is more unconditionally given than parents. None of us chooses our own parents. And we do not have an easy time growing up with our parents. After those first months and years of helplessness in which we are dependent on the care and love of father and mother, we gradually come to experience them as getting in the way of getting our own way. Nor do we for a long time, if ever, understand them; they precede us and much about them

is beyond us, a mystery—we come to honor and respect what we do not yet know... I am who I am only in a relation of honor and reverence to others—and the first and most enduring relation to others that we are aware of is to mother and father.¹

Giving honor to one's parents is therefore designed to be the primer school where every human being discovers what it means to love and revere God. None of us can escape this gateway. It remains a perpetual model which cannot be avoided, for none of us ever ceases being children of parents.

What then were the ways in which Israel was to demonstrate honor to their parents?

II. The Definition of Honor

The operative word of the commandment is the verb "honor" (*kabed*). A broader concept than the term "obey," "honor" comes from a root (*kbd*), meaning "to be or become heavy, weighty." In this particular verbal stem (the piel) it means "to honor," i.e., "to lend someone weight, or esteem," or "to acknowledge someone as weighty."² Parents are to be prized by their children, who should lend them esteem all their lives. As Bruce Waltke further explains:

"To honor" exalts the object. The term is used frequently in worship (Ps 86:9) and its probable parallel in Leviticus 19:3 is "fear, to reverence to" father and mother, a term otherwise reserved for God. To honor involves a heart-attitude. To illustrate, my wife and I began with two sets of dishes. We have the ordinary ware that the kids learned to wash and dry. However, we also have the fine china we received on our wedding day—We have been married over fifty years, and I still remember the day we broke a saucer. The china never goes through the dishwasher; it is hand-washed carefully and tenderly. To honor parents is to have this similar heart-attitude; to esteem them as dear and precious.³

Giving social weight to one's parents finds its dark counterpart in the child who "curses" his parents in Exodus 21:17. The root (*qalal*) means "to treat as a lightweight, small, of no significance, despicable." So serious was this crime in Israel, it received the maximum punishment, reiterating the fact that the way a child treats his parents is a direct indicator of the value he or she gives to God.

"He who curses his father or mother shall surely be put to death." (Exod 21:17)

The severity of the consequences is confirmed in a host of other passages (Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18-21; 27:16). The fact that these were not idle threats was attested to centuries later by Israel's sages. They astutely observed that the mill of God's justice may grind slowly, but it "grinds exceedingly fine."

**He who curses his father or his mother,
His lamp will go out in time of darkness. (Prov 20:20)**
The eye that mocks a father

**And scorns a mother,
The ravens of the valley will pick it out,
And the young eagles will eat it. (Prov 30:17)**

III. Expressions of Honor: Physical Care for Aging Parents

A. The logic of caring for parents

Several commentators observe that the commandment was first addressed to adult children burdened with the responsibility of traveling with elderly parents. This emerging nation stood in a very vulnerable position, with imposing threats pressing in from every side. Trekking across an uninhabited wasteland with elderly parents who could not take care of their basic needs was cumbersome and inefficient to say the least, in the worst case, debilitating. Given the severity of the conditions in the wilderness of Sinai, coupled with the length and mode of travel, it would have been very tempting for heads of families to abandon their parents once they suffered injury or became infirm, rather than placing the community at risk with additional burdens.

Into that well-defined context God speaks the first word of human responsibility: “Do not neglect the older generation because they are weak or infirm. Prize them by caring for them. Take their burdens upon yourself as a supreme privilege. As you do unto them, so you do it unto me.”

The logic of the command is rather simple. If parents sacrificed their time and ambitions to give birth to you, washing, bathing, feeding and nurturing you, then it is only fitting and right that you do exactly the same for them when they become child-like in old age. God is not interested in efficiency and productivity as primary values that drive his people; rather, he is determined that tenderness, nurture and covenantal love give the defining shape to his people and bind multiple generations into one.

I grew up in a family that did not overtly express affection. My dad was a professional man who excelled as a surgeon, but was extremely quiet and rarely articulated emotion. He had difficulty entering other people’s worlds. As a teenager, however, I was privileged to experience one of those rare moments. He and I were driving home together from a golf game, when for some unknown reason he diverted his route and drove up to a convalescent home. My thoughts were racing with questions, but in typical fashion he gave no explanation. He entered the hospital without a word, while I trailed behind in muffled silence. The sights and smells assaulted and clung to me. It was as if my youthful exuberance was alien to all that resided there. I followed my dad down a dark hallway, where a doorway was half open to a dingy room. Lying there was his ninety-two year old mother, my grandma. Her once robust appearance was now emaciated, her voice tremulous and incoherent. I felt very uncomfortable as an eyewitness to the ravages of old age and senility on my grandma.

After a brief silence, my dad looked down at the bowl of soup lying on her tray. He picked it up and began to feed her as one would a newborn. After a few minutes he asked me to take over. I nervously gripped the spoon and, like an eager apprentice, imitated his movements as I watched him watching me with approval in his eyes. It was a rare occasion in the Morgan household to have three generations gathered in one place. But for these few brief moments I was the proud apprentice of my father’s tender affection for his senile mother who would soon be laid to rest. There was also a new dimension to the feelings of affection I felt. I did not know it then, but I

realized later that this was my first encounter with the fifth commandment, spanning the aged bridge between heaven and earth. In the words of the finale in *Les Misérables*, I began to see that “to love another person is to see the face of God.” Perhaps the most tangible expression of God’s face is when we look into the eyes of our parents as we lay them in the grave.

B. Examples of caring for parents

How deeply this commandment was inculcated into Israel’s soul is exemplified by saints who fulfilled it even in the most perilous times. Fleeing for his life from Saul, David found his only refuge in the cave of Adullam. Joined later by his parents, he risked his life to provide a safe haven for them in Moab (1 Sam 22:3-4). When Ruth had the opportunity to abandon her mother-in-law for a better life after the death of her husband, she refused, insisting on returning to Israel with Naomi. She “clung” to her to care for her. Ruth’s loyal-love reversed Naomi’s fortunes and brought her national acclaim by all in Israel (Ruth 4:13).

How should honor function in painful or abusive homes? Twenty-one years after Joseph had endured abuse and abandonment by his family, he seized the opportunity his new position afforded him in Egypt. He not only provided food for them, he also acquired the very best land in Egypt for his father, all of his brothers and their families and flocks to resettle (Gen 47:11-12). Later, when Jacob died, Joseph further honored him with a mourning period of forty days, and fulfilled his promise to return his body to the land of promise. Arriving at the threshing floor of Atad, beyond the Jordan, they wept another seven days. I imagine their grief was a mixture of deep sadness for their father, coupled with holy awe for what God had accomplished through Joseph to heal the family. So intense was the mourning even the Canaanites were moved by their lamentation. They named the place “Abel-mizraim” (“the mourning of Egypt,” Gen 50:11). This demonstrates that in some cases, children of abuse can become “Christ figures,” imparting mercy and grace to the souls of disobedient parents. Giving respect and honor to someone who does not deserve it can be the means of grace that prods them to repentance. It forces them to examine the holy role that God has entrusted to them.

Perhaps the greatest display of self-sacrifice in honoring a parent came from one who had nothing to give. As our Lord was in his final hour on the cross, he looked down and saw his mother. Even as he was in the gruesome vise of hell, being tortured for our sins, he was overcome with compassion for his mother, who would soon be homeless:

When Jesus then saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then He said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” From that hour the disciple took her into his own household. (John 19:26-27)

Paul was adamant that the principle should not be violated in the church. At Ephesus, he instructed Timothy not to put any widow on the list for financial support if she had surviving children. The apostle considered it shameful for the church to provide financial care for parents who had capable children: “If any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God” (1 Tim 5:4). In Paul’s mind, for believers to refuse this responsibility was criminal: “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household,

he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim 5:8). The Pharisees received similar condemnation from Jesus when they prevented children from caring financially for their parents by their overbearing “tithing”—traditions that undermined the most basic human commandment of the Torah (Mark 7:9-13).

C. Implications of care in the modern world

Parents are our first human touch with God, and they remain that way as long as they live. This may give us cause to rethink our modern mentality of retirement. For many, the goal of our working years is to earn enough money that we won’t be a burden to our children in our waning years. We will be able to “purchase” all the care we need. A noble thought, but is it really biblical? Is it robbing the third generation of the art of nurturing the elderly and experiencing the dignity and wisdom of old age? And is it really God’s ideal that in America there is a mass exodus of the elderly from the neighborhoods they grew up in to retire in distant, Eden-like locales where they have no history? God’s ideal is that families grow up and find nurture in the presence of multiple generations. Of course, economics is a factor that may prevent the ideal, especially in our area. But let us not forget the ideal. In the church family it also suggests that discipleship that is organized solely on the basis of age is not the ideal. True discipleship needs the influence of all ages interrelating together. This may be the reason why our children’s ministry here at PBCC is so successful, since by its very design it incorporates singles and couples of all ages to provide a nurturing environment for our children.

D. The benefits of care

God promises that by obeying his word our time on earth will not only be enhanced, making it holy, but our lives will be rooted in stability and longevity. Wendell Berry captures the thought well in one of his Sabbath poems:

Whatever happens,
those who have learned
to love one another
have made their way
to the lasting word
and will not leave,
whatever happens.⁴

By contrast, “When a younger person abuses an old and honored man (Isa 3:5) it betokens anarchy and disintegration of the societal order (cf. Isa 3:4, 12). Neglect of the aged is an expression of heartlessness (Deut 28:50; Isa 47:6; Lam 4:16; 5:12).”⁵ Violating the commandment will lead to the downfall of the nation, exile, and the loss of land. As Auden says, “We must love each other or die.” In this regard, Malachi’s final words after the exile are instructive that in the Messianic era of the New Covenant, *shalom* can only be launched after a “new” Elijah comes to restore this commandment within Israel:

Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. (Mal 4:4-6)

IV. Expressions of Honor: Obedience to God’s Word

A. Obedience in the Old Testament

The second major expression of honor to parents is to obey their teaching. In a covenant community, parents are instructed to be the primary spiritual teachers of their children. They not only bring them up physically, they are given the responsibility of nurturing them spiritually (Deut 6:6-9). Parents are required to pass on the teachings of God in all their substance and purity. The goal is to first initiate, then tutor and discipline the child in all the ways of the Lord, inculcating in his heart not only external practices, but more importantly, attitudes of “fear,” “trust” and “love” that undergird a healthy relationship with God (Prov 3:5-12). The book of Proverbs is the supreme example of parents standing in the place of God, offering children the very voice of God in all the complexities of life. In Proverbs 3:1-4, the father applies the promise of this commandment to his teaching to show that there is no divergence between God’s teaching and his own:

**My son, do not forget my teaching,
But let your heart keep my commandments;
For length of days and years of life
And peace they will add to you.
Do not let kindness and truth leave you;
Bind them around your neck,
Write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute
In the sight of God and man. (Prov 3:1-4)**

Children display honor to their parents by treating their words seriously and being diligent to obey them. The goal of healthy teaching, however, is not to keep children dependent on parents, but to inculcate the teachings of the Lord in their hearts, so that they would become more and more independent, until in young adulthood they are completely weaned of their parents’ instruction to live a life of moral beauty in dependence upon the Lord. It’s never appropriate for parents to manipulate their children by emotional control, as if they were puppets designed to live out their unfulfilled dreams.

B. Obedience in the New Testament

The New Testament sets out the application of obedience expanded within the church. For new believers coming from Gentile backgrounds it was common to have more than one set of “parents” – one who birthed them physically, another who gave birth to them spiritually. Paul describes himself to the Thessalonians as a tender “father” and nursing “mother” who sacrificially gave them not only the gospel but his own life as well (1 Thess 2:7-8). He gave of himself sacrificially, passing down the doctrines of Christ in all their purity. It is only right therefore to give honor to those who sacrificed their lives to give us a new birth of the Spirit by obeying the teaching of the Lord and respecting their leadership (Heb 13:17). I will forever be indebted to David Roper, who initiated me in the pure waters of the gospel and equipped me to be a pastor when I was in college. Once a week for four years he drove up to my fraternity to teach me the Scriptures, that I might turn around and teach them to others. I have never been able to show him enough appreciation for the course he set my life on.

Being identified with two families also heightens the conflict for children. What does a child do when allegiance to Christ goes sharply against the desires of his parents? How do children honor parents when they are opposed to a desired career path, or the choice of a spouse, or where one wants to go to school or settle down? If the

child is still living at home, and financially supported by the parents, it is very difficult to make the case for disobedience, for the parent is “funding” their choices. If, however, the child is self-supporting, the choice is more complex. On the one hand, we should not treat their words lightly, but on the other, we must recognize that allegiance to Christ is greater than allegiance to our parents (Luke 14:26). And if we are truly following Christ, what may look like dishonor in the short run will eventually bring honor to them by obeying Christ.

As parents, it is important to remember that Christ himself came into severe conflict with his family. At one point they thought he had lost his senses and sought to rescue him from his revolutionary “agenda” (Mark 3:21). But Jesus stood his ground. He would not obey. In fact, he redefined the “family” in spiritual terms (Mark 3:33-35). This suggests that even in godly homes it is difficult for parents, even with the best of intentions, to see their children through “spiritual” eyes rather than “according to the flesh.” Because of this, wise parents allow their son or daughter the freedom to leave the confines of the home to discover his or her spiritual gifts within the larger body of Christ. Though it is painful at first, letting go of your children will ultimately bring you more honor.

If we observe anything at all in these commandments it is that God’s chief concern is “integration.” These words are designed to bring heaven to earth through a community made up of free citizens bound together by covenantal love. The new community is to be a mirror image of life that pervades heaven: filled with freedom, fertility, celebration, responsibility, nurture, and love.

As I shared earlier, demonstrating affection was a rare thing in our family. I often wondered what would happen when it was my turn to show that supreme honor to my parents in their declining years. How would I react when it was time to lay them in the grave? My sister has sacrificially taken on the bulk of the load in caring for them. In August 2001, she called to say that dad was dying and almost comatose. I went to see him in the hospital. After everyone left the room I was alone with him. He awoke and stared at me with those hazel eyes. Eyes never age. We were so close, gazing into each other’s eyes. But I could not refrain from turning away. Was it fear of feeling the affection of a father, or fear of seeing my dad seized by the fear of death? I was afraid to look into his eyes this one last time. Returning home, I felt like I had missed a divine opportunity. But dad survived a few more months. God gave me a second chance to connect with him. Just before Christmas I went back to the hospital. Entering the room, I noticed the television was tuned to a football game. Memories of my youth came flooding back. I took his hand and together we watched the game.

Watching Football

December 15, 2001

Today I went to see my father
and to gaze into his eyes.
Was he dying of pneumonia?
I know he was terrified
and tortured in pain,
yet above his head a TV was fixed on football.
I took his hand
and he squeezed mine,
and for a moment
he was no longer my father
but a frail human being
in need of comfort, compassion
and a tender touch of hope.
I took his hand
and he took mine
and we watched football;
that’s what fathers and sons do.
Once when I was a little boy, during halftime
he made me a pair of frail goal posts out of wood
so I could pretend and play
on my own football field in my backyard,
then he threw the ball to me until the game resumed.
Now I was holding his hand at halftime
and in one minute the game would resume
and perhaps with it, eternity.

Before I left I looked deep into his hazel eyes,
eyes never age,
“I love you, dad.”
Summoning all his strength
and vacant beating breath
he said, “I love you, too.”
Today we watched football
that’s what fathers and sons do.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 256-257.
2. C. Westermann, “kbd,” *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (eds. Ernst Jenni & Claus Westermann; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997).
3. Bruce K. Waltke, “Gift of the Old Covenant,” *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).
4. Wendell Berry, *Given, Poems* (Emeryville, Calif.: Shoemaker Hoard, 2005), 55.
5. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 2000), 3:55.

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