

Honor Your Father and Your Mother

Exodus 20:12

September 27, 2026

I once knew a young boy, very compliant, hardly a trouble-maker, but he had the heart of a Pharisee. One day, while carrying out his father's instructions, along with the trash, he sulked. Recognizing a bad attitude, his father investigated, "Is something wrong?" The son's reply was so bold, so snarky, that it has been recorded with an iron pen in his family history—"I'm doing what you said, but I don't have to like it, do I?"

Young people, you should not say that to your parents! More importantly, you should pray for God to protect you from that kind of sin. By his words, this young man exposed his stubborn heart. He knew it was right to do what his parents said,¹ but he sometimes hated doing the right thing, because deep down he thought he knew better than them. He would never say that, but that was his attitude. For whatever reason—maybe because the father was so surprised at his son's honesty—he showed much mercy that day. (And yes, I know these facts, because I am that boy.)

You can grasp the irony when my father reminded me of this incident years later, having children of my own. Sometime in those intervening years, my perspective had changed. (Imagine that...)² My thoughts had changed, though, not simply because of my experience with my own children, but because I had spent more time meditating on Bible passages like the fifth commandment.

In the fifth commandment, the Lord attends to humanity's rebellious heart. He is addressing the reality that people prefer to push back against God's created order. The fact that I could have told my story with a different set of identities demonstrates that the application of the fifth commandment extends beyond young children. What if I said, instead of a father and son, a policeman and a driver, or a pastor and a church member, or a husband and wife, a president and a citizen, or an employer and his employee? Probably several of those scenarios resonate with each of us. In His wisdom, the Lord has addressed the sparks of rebellion in every sphere of authority with this brief word: **Honor your father and your mother.**

Notice even where the fifth commandment is placed. It's not accidental. Just as the first commandment is foundational to the first four, so the fifth lays the groundwork for the last six.³ How so? Do we not see a kind of self-exaltation in commands 6-10? A kind of "me-first" attitude, that works out in sinful act? Murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, coveting—all these raise the offender above the offended. But the fifth, **honor your father and mother**, reorients us. I am *not* first. All my desires are *not* priority. In fact, the person and priorities of others are first. Love for neighbor is grounded right here.

Those lessons begin from the earliest moments of life—in the home, under the care and instruction of parents. Parents, *you* set the primary pattern for how your children will engage with all kinds of people for the rest of their lives. They too may one day say, "Ohh, that sounded like my father." Indeed, society is built on how children and parents relate to one another, both in ancient Israel and in modern-day America.

So, the fifth commandment is not a Mosaic children's sermon, breaking up the adult worship at Mt. Sinai. The fifth commandment is not an aside meant just for the young children in the room. It *is* for them, but not only for them. These Ten Words were addressed to the whole congregation of

¹ As Ephesians 6:1 says.

² For the sake of clarity, it *is* better to obey and "not like it" than to "not like it" *and* not obey. And we all struggle with competing desires. But God is concerned with both hands and heart. True obedience requires both.

³ DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 80.

Israel, young children and adult children alike.⁴ So look with me and see how God attends to our hearts. See, first, how the fifth commandment reveals God's design.

I. God's design

The command to **Honor** implies a sense of order. Actually, the word conveys weight, heaviness. To **honor** is to consider father and mother as more significant than self. The Old Testament also uses the word **honor** for the kind of esteem we give to God. So, sometimes, it's translated "glorify." For example, Psalm 22:23, **You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!** This is one aspect of what we mean when we say, "glorify God"—to make His view of a situation so heavy it becomes our view, to acknowledge He is most important in a situation. God is to be the most significant factor for His people, and He tells them, in a similar way, hold your parents in high esteem.⁵

The Lord commands Israel, "don't take father and mother for granted. Don't act like they don't know what they're talking about. Don't act like they don't matter. Don't act like they're a burden. Respect them, listen to them, learn from them, be grateful to them, and for them. When they are advanced in years, care for them. Honor your father and mother."

Because God places parents in a position, not of baseless entitlement, but of grave responsibility. Psalm 127:3 says **Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord**—like a gift, on loan from the Lord, to be stewarded by parents on His behalf. Parents stand in the place of God before their children, as His representatives.⁶ We train our children not only how to relate to the world around them, but how to relate to God.⁷ If children will learn to honor their parents, they'll have a pattern for honoring the Lord. That is the goal. A well-ordered society is simply secondary.

Ephesians 6:1-4, quoting the fifth commandment under the new covenant, says the same. **Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.** Notice the responsibility of children is followed directly with the responsibility of parents. Father and mother are to be regarded as weighty because they bear a weighty responsibility.

And isn't God gracious in that design?! Not only are children a gift to parents, but parents are a gift to their children. Each of us needed instruction, direction, correction. We needed to learn authority and submission, and God gave us the teachers of father and mother, who fulfilled their role, mixed with love, with sacrifice, with compassion and consideration, patiently enduring all those experiences that come with infancy, childhood, the teenage years.⁸ And after that, they keep giving and keep loving well into the adult years of their children. Parents, we thank God for you!

Some may say, and for good reason, their parents fall short of God's design. And I wouldn't be surprised if every parent in the room agrees with that conclusion about themselves. I could have done more or I could have done better as a parent. But notice that neither Moses, nor Paul, says, "Honor your parents because they're honorable, because they're superstar parents." Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. That is not the point. Honoring them is not affirming their *performance*. Like

⁴ Alexander, *Exodus*, 414.

⁵ Alexander, *Exodus*, 413.

⁶ Alexander, *Exodus*, 413; Stuart, *Exodus*, 461.

⁷ This is the essence of the book of Proverbs. And the father knows the significance of parental instruction. 1:7-8 sets the tone for the book—wisdom is bound up in the fear of the Lord cast in the instruction of fathers and mothers.

⁸ Calvin, "God's Doctrine of Authority," in *Free Grace Broadcaster*, Issue 266, 6.

honoring every God-given authority, it is to recognize the *position* that God has placed them in.⁹ Honor is for the Lord's sake, because His design is good, as He is good. He has given you life through your parents and used them, in some way, to accomplish His work in you.

God's design for Israel included a kind of order that would lead to flourishing as a nation. We see that in the way the command includes a promise. **That your days might be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.** When Deuteronomy 5:16 repeats the command, it adds a phrase: **that your days may be long AND that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.** But that is fundamentally the same idea in Exodus, for how pleasant would *long* life be if were not also *going well*?

This is what God intends: He wants His people to prosper. He wants them to humble themselves under a His good order in a way that would lead to their longevity as a nation. And He's telling them how to make that happen. Honor your father and mother. By doing so, God would specially provide for the nation, but He would do so also through natural consequences, by the way one generation regarded another. For how should a generation who disregarded their parents expect their children to treat them?¹⁰

This was not God's design for Israel exclusively, but for all humanity from the beginning. At the very beginning, the very first son, Adam, knew this aspect of moral law, that he was to honor his Father.¹¹ And if he refused, his whole life would be altered. Indeed, in his rebellion, he first lost access to the good land that God had given him; he lost the pleasantness of life; he lost long life; finally he lost life itself.¹² Because he refused to honor his Father. And when Adam rebelled, he flung open the door of our rebellion with him. All people *should* honor father and mother. But in Adam's steps, we have rejected God's good design.

So Moses applies the principle of the fifth commandment almost immediately to some specific sins. Exodus 21:15 speaks of the consequences of **striking** a parent, Exodus 21:17 of **cursing** a parent. Cursing there is the opposite of **honor**. Instead of regarding as weighty, it's making light of something. When the Lord rebuked Job, Job used the same word, and said, **I am of small account...**¹³ "I consider myself insignificant." Job's assessment was "light-weight" compared to the Lord's purposes. To regard father or mother as "light-weight" is not what God intends. Translating that word "curse" reminds us that dishonor is often found in words, how one speaks to or about a parent. In Exodus 21, both offenses carry the penalty of **death**.

Exodus 21 applies to instances of rebellion. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 speaks of patterns, **If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.** His parents persisted with him; they multiplied attempts to steer him in the right direction, but the son persisted in rebellion. The judgement—again—death.

If the act isn't corrected, the act becomes a pattern, and if the pattern isn't corrected, the pattern becomes a way of life, even for a whole people. That was Israel's situation in Ezekiel 22:7, **father and mother are treated with contempt.** **Contempt** is that "light-weight" word again.

⁹ Hunter and Hunt, "Honoring Father and Mother in an Age of No Contact."

¹⁰ Cole, *Exodus*.

¹¹ Luke 3:38 refers to Adam explicitly as "the Son of God"

¹² Genesis 3:23-24; 3:17-19; 3:22; 5:5

¹³ Job 40:3

Alongside murder, extortion, oppression, abuse, and lots of other sins, **contempt** for parents was one of the reasons Israel was scattered from their land.

Yet, not even the severity of that judgment changed the hearts of the nation. If anything, some hearts grew harder over many generations. Jesus rebuked the Jews in Matthew 15:4-6, **Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.** How deceitful the heart¹⁴ that not only rebels against the command, but justifies the rebellion under a heading of worship.

Time has not helped us escape this corruption. It is a universal rebellion, and a ongoing rebellion. Paul described the difficulty of the last days in 2 Timothy 3:2-4. **For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.**

The whole world is set against us who want to be faithful here. We are tempted not only by our own hearts, but by a world who would offer us a revised fifth commandment: *Honor yourself, that you might live long in the land that you make possible for yourself.* But that is hardly more than the serpent’s ancient lie recycled in modern terms.

And notice, again, in those verses I quoted, that Scripture doesn’t apply this command only to young children. In large part, sin against the fifth commandment is sustained in the hearts of adult children. Just as idolatry passes from one generation to the next, so does the spirit of rebellion.

There is the judgment of the law, but merely dwelling on the command doesn’t end the corruption. The law is good; it shows us God’s good design for the family, and that there is an order in society. But the law will not take away the guilt of rebellion. For that, we need Christ, who never broke the fifth commandment. Young people, can you imagine that? Jesus never disobeyed His parents, not once. See secondly, how the fifth commandment points to Christ’s righteousness.

II. Christ’s Righteousness

This is what the law was meant to do, to point us to Christ. All of us are guilty of regarding our parents too lightly. On the other hand, Christ never talked back, never argued, never hit or kicked His parents, never threw His food or yelled at His parents, He never forgot His chores or stayed out too late. He never disobeyed their instructions. He never mocked His parents or talked badly about them to His friends. He was truly the perfect child that none of us will ever be,¹⁵ even through adulthood.

The gospels show us glimpses of how He honored his human parents. Luke 2:51, He **was submissive to them.** John 19:26-27, after Jesus’ earthly father had already died, Mary remained in Jesus’ care. But on the cross, He was aware of her needs and even took that moment to honor her by placing her in the care of John. (Consider that! On the cross, suffering in agony Himself, and caring for the life of His mother. Nothing more “inconvenient” than that.)

I suppose a few references don’t prove that He *always* honored His parents. But 1 John reminds us that **in Him was no sin,**¹⁶ including the sin of breaking the fifth commandment.

¹⁴ Jeremiah 17:9

¹⁵ Ryken, *Exodus*, 612.

¹⁶ 1 John 3:5

But He is more than a faithful human son. He is the faithful Son of God, unfazed by the tempter's persuasions, always honoring His heavenly Father. He came down from heaven not to do His own will but the will of His Father (John 6:38). He spoke just what His Father taught Him (John 8:26-28; 12:49). He took seriously His Father's will (John 5:30). He laid down His life according to His Father's charge (John 10:18). He did as His Father commanded (John 14:31); in fact, He kept all His Father's commands (John 15:10). He loved His Father (John 14:31). He honored His Father (John 8:49). He always did the things that are pleasing to His Father (John 8:29). He accomplished the work His Father gave Him to do (John 17:4). From birth to death, He delighted (He "liked") to do the will of God His Father.

Here is a key to the significance of the fifth commandment. In Christ we see that every other command that He was faithful to obey also served to make Him obedient to this fifth commandment. See, kids, anytime you choose to break a rule your parents have made, you also do not honor them. It's like a double crime. In one act, 2 things go wrong (if not more). See how tough the law is? It shows us our bigger heart problems through all kinds of ways we use our hands and feet and mouths wrongly.

The fifth commandment teaches us to honor parents and other authorities, and our heavenly Father. In that way, then, it truly is parallel to the first commandment. For, in order to fully obey the fifth commandment, we must fully obey 6-10. And yet, it will never happen. Except in Christ, who is the Beloved Son, with whom the Father is well-pleased.¹⁷

In Him, we see a perfect example of obedience to the fifth commandment, and a perfect sacrifice for our sin of disobedience. So now, we are not counting on our obedience to the fifth commandment for life. Now, **whoever has the Son has life**,¹⁸ a better kind of life than the fifth commandment ever promised. For those who believe in the name of the Son of God, His obedience is ours; His life, eternal life, is ours.

And His Spirit is ours. See, third, how the fifth commandment requires the Holy Spirit's power.

III. The Holy Spirit's Power

The New Testament calls the law "weak."¹⁹ It tells me to honor my parents. It charges me when I have not submitted to the order God has put in my life. And it judges me when I have not fully submitted to the authority of God. The law is strong enough to spotlight sin, but it is too weak to repair my condition.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption that we have received by trusting in Christ. He is the Son of God by nature; the Spirit makes us sons of God by adoption,²⁰ and grants us the privilege to cry out to God as our True Father.²¹

Sinclair Ferguson describes the effect of this adoption in *Devoted to God* (the book we have been reading for Wednesday night STINT): "We experience not only a change in status (as in adoption) so that we belong to God's family, but also a real transformation of our lives so that we begin to develop the characteristics of our adoptive family." "We are becoming like our elder brother, Jesus Christ,"²² who, we have seen, was consumed with honoring His Father.

¹⁷ Matthew 3:17

¹⁸ 1 John 5:12

¹⁹ Romans 8:3; Hebrews 7:18-19

²⁰ Smeaton, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 190-91.

²¹ Romans 8:15

²² Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 25, 31.

So this spiritual transformation likewise transforms the fifth commandment for us. We are motivated and empowered to obey, not for our sake, and not for our parents' sake, but for the sake of Christ, who honored His Father and "liked" it.²³

No matter what the situation is with our earthly parents, we might now see them through spiritual eyes. Are they godly? Thank God for them and regard them as if they speak spiritual wisdom. Are they unwise? Regard them with patience and compassion, as Christ does, holding on to the truth yourself. Are they unbelieving? Regard them with pity and concern, even serving them in ways that might adorn the gospel. Have they already gone to be with the Lord? Glorify God for how He used them and share those God-glorifying testimonies with another generation.

The Spirit in you makes honoring parents possible. The Spirit in you makes you willing.

Conclusion

In the first few years of parenting, I concluded that Ephesians 6:1 should be every child's first memory verse. I quoted it earlier: **Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.** I came to that conclusion, not because I needed a way to put my children in a Scriptural headlock until they complied. But because it is a direct line to the gospel. God now uses the fifth commandment to restore rebellious hearts to a heavenly Father: by His good design, by the righteousness of Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

²³ This reality makes the fifth commandment immensely helpful in discerning a child's spiritual condition, not under law, but under the gospel. E.g. Have you noticed a change in how your child relates to you? Is he/she more respectful? More obedient? More grateful? If the Holy Spirit has wrought a change of heart, one of the first observable fruits for a young person will be a different regard for you, the parent.