

The Fifth Commandment

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Moses writes in Deuteronomy 4:39-40:

Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

Among this world's versions of what is commonly called "Christianity," keeping God's commandments is considered with varying degrees of suspicion, at the least, all the way to some being outright hostile, almost as if keeping them were some kind of a curse. Yet, God Himself urges His children to keep them "that it may go well with [them]." He does not say that keeping them will produce spiritual salvation, but that they will produce a pattern of life that results in stability, safety, and enjoyment in personal and community life.

This series on the Ten Commandments began with the statement that the commandments seem to be arranged in an order, beginning with the most important. That is, they start with the one that, if broken, will inevitably lead to breaking the others, resulting in chaos in a person's worship of God.

The *first commandment* presents God as the sovereign Creator and Ruler of His creation. He will not allow the worship and honor due to Him to be given to others because it would only result in misdirection of life's purpose, frustration, emotional and physical pain, and ultimately death to those who worship any but Him. It therefore deals with *what* we worship. Most of the time, the "god" who gets between the true God and us is the self. We are to worship the Creator, the Author of a way of life that will produce right relationships. This commandment demands that we make Him the source of our values and practices.

The *second commandment* teaches that He wants no one to be concerned about what He looks like. He has purposefully hidden this knowledge except to tell us that we generally look like Him. However, we do not know specifics. He has done this because physical attributes can be misleading about character. In our relationship with Him, He wants us to emphasize the spiritual—His character, the qualities of His spiritual attributes, and His purpose. The second commandment, then, involves the *way* we are to worship Him—in spirit and in truth, always aware that man does not live by bread alone.

The *third commandment* emphasizes the holy quality of His character and offices as identified by His names. His names reveal what He is. It is the Christian's responsibility to adorn and uphold the reputation and glory of all that those names imply. When we were regenerated, His Family name—God—became our Family name! We were baptized by the Spirit of God into that name. The third commandment therefore covers the *quality* of our witness in bearing that name.

The *fourth commandment* provides the means by which His Family members can guard and maintain things pertaining to His purpose, keeping them aligned with His creative purpose. The Sabbath

provides a more formal environment for coming to know more clearly the truth regarding God's plan, His purpose, His character and personality, and the right and true goals toward which we are to expend time and energy. His Word shows that when Israel failed to keep the Sabbath, they lost track of the wholesome qualities of His purpose. Sabbath-breaking and idolatry go hand in hand.

The first four commandments define our relationship with God. They encompass the magnitude of God's power and name, and they exhort us to focus our time and energies on His purpose, plan, character, and promises, as well as on our vital part in the completion of His creation in us as individuals. He is our all in all.

The Second Tablet Begins

The fifth commandment begins the second section of the ten. It is placed, as the first commandment is toward God, first among those commands that govern our relationships with other men. The effect that keeping or failing to keep the fifth commandment has on those relationships is huge. Not only is it chief in importance in this regard, but it also acts as a bridge between the Commandment's two sections. This is vital because, when the fifth commandment is properly kept, it leads to reverence for and obedience to God Himself, the ultimate Parent.

As we begin we need to define three important words. The commandment as written in Exodus 20:12 states, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you." The Hebrew word underlying "honor" suggests heaviness, weightiness, severity, and richness, all in a long-lasting, continuing sense. It implies an important or significant, lifelong responsibility, thus it is used in the sense of honoring, glorifying, imposing, or being weighty. As an adjective, it magnifies the implications of a noun. In English, *honor* means "to give high regard, respect, and esteem to; give special recognition to; to bring or give respect or credit to; an outward token, sign or act that manifests high regard for."

Two English synonyms help to focus the implications of this commandment. *Respect* means "to have deferential regard for; to treat with propriety and consideration; to regard as inviolable." *Reverence* indicates "to show deferential respect." It is respect turned a notch higher because it is combined with adoration or awe, in a good sense, or great shame, in a bad one.

It is helpful further to understand that, though this commandment is primarily aimed at the function of parenting, it is certainly not limited to it. The keeping of this law also includes within its spirit the honor and respect that should be given to civil and teaching figures.

Why does God want a person to honor his parents and other authority figures? First, the family is the basic building block of society. The stability of the family is essential to the stability of the community. The more respectful each family member is of other family members, especially of parents, the greater the degree of respect that will carry beyond the immediate family and into strengthening the community.

The family is also the basic building block of government. The lessons and principles learned from honoring, respecting, and submitting to one's parents result in a society stable enough to promote the development of the whole person.

Seeds of a Dysfunctional Community

Isaiah 3:1-5, 12 provides us this record:

For behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, takes away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stock and the store, the whole supply of bread and the whole supply of water; the mighty man and the man of war, the judge and the prophet, and the diviner and the elder; the captain of fifty and the honorable man, the counselor and the skillful artisan, and the expert enchanter. "I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. The people will be oppressed, everyone by another and every one by his neighbor; the child will be insolent toward the elder, and the base toward the honorable. . . . As for My people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths."

The issue in this context concerns adults in positions of authority, but these adults never truly matured. When dishonoring parents is taken to an extreme, it produces an anarchy that will reach out to infect the community as well. "Anarchy" describes an absence of government; it defines general disorder, a time when each person does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).

Those trained in the home to dishonor parents will resist authority on every front, whether civic authorities, supervisors on the job, teachers in school, or coaches of a team. Self-centeredness stands at the foundation of this action. Those so created will pay little attention to honoring community standards because they do not respect them. Thus, they will not discipline themselves to submit to them. They always think they know what is best for them and for everybody else too. They will follow whatever impulse drives them, regardless of how it affects others.

This rebellious liberalism first produces an irritated grumbling in others, but it can soon build into general disorder and confusion. Ultimately, if unchecked, chaos results. In due course, a whole culture's energies are expended merely to survive, effectively destroying the development of spiritual, creative, and intellectual qualities essential to an individual's and to society's well-being. This is the very path America is following.

Immaturity is a direct result of not honoring parents. People of this mindset have a hard time cooperating because their minds are filled with insecurities, they feel they are being taken advantage of, or they feel driven to compete in everything. As they age, they feel put upon, and thus become quite defensive. Because such children are not made to respect their parents' advice, they grow up not understanding what truly works, so they lack wisdom. This failure reveals itself in self-will and self-indulgence that can be taken to the point of sheer rebellion. It condemns children to learning the lessons of life through the hard, harsh experiences of personal warfare.

Why the Family?

The second reason God wants us to learn to honor our parents is that the family is also the basic building block of the Kingdom of God. The godly principles learned and the character built within the human family unit is transferable into the spiritual family relationship of the Kingdom of God. God expects a transference from parents to Him of the character and manner of living derived from keeping this commandment.

Parents are His representatives, His agents, to begin preparations for the Kingdom of God. Thus the creative majesty and power of God is honored and revered in the parents when children obey them. The prophet writes in Malachi 2:10-16:

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, for Judah has profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob the man who does this, being awake and aware, yet who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts!

And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. "For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the Lord of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

This passage is directed toward Judah generally and toward the priests specifically at a time when the institution of marriage was under attack. Idolatrous marriages with foreign women were common, as was divorce. Today, marriage is under attack generally, but specifically from perverse same-sex unions. The Jews of Malachi's day wondered why, despite giving their offerings to God, they were receiving no blessings from Him. His answer: their idolatrous marriages and covenant-breaking divorces. He specifically states that a purpose of marriage is that He wants godly children to be produced. These marriages were not producing godly children.

The Hebrew word that is translated as "godly" is *elohim*, used here as an adjective. It means "filled with reverence and love for God; devout, pious; belonging to or emanating from God." Godliness and holiness are not specifically the same: Godliness is a respectful, reverential attitude, while holiness indicates living as God does. As attributes, as qualities of character, they are absolutely inseparable.

The conclusion is inescapable. After creating Adam and Eve and announcing that He had created them in His image, God immediately establishes the family through marriage. Marriage, therefore, plays an important role in God's overall purpose of creating man in His image. This fact provides the fifth commandment with its greatest degree of significance.

Child Training and Holiness

Notice the beginnings of two very important chapters regarding family relationships in the Book of Holiness, Leviticus. The entire book of Leviticus provides specific instruction pertaining directly to the subject of holiness. Of course, the whole Bible deals with holiness, but no specific section so directly focuses on it regarding family and community relations as Leviticus 18-20.

Holiness suggests separation, of being specifically different from others because one is living much as God does. Hebrews 12:14 clearly states its importance: "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." If we are not separated from the world by our conduct, we will not be in God's Kingdom.

Leviticus 18:1-5 declares:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doing of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.'"

Notice that in this five-verse prelude God emphasizes, "Don't copy the people of those nations outside of Israel. Be different by keeping My laws." It becomes clear when this introduction is read along with the laws that follow in this and the next two chapters that God intends that separation from the world begin in the home at the very earliest point in time possible. It should begin in a child's infancy with a right example from the parents combined with their positive instruction. Leviticus 19:2-4 adds:

Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. Every one of you shall revere his mother and father, and keep My Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols, nor make for yourselves molded gods: I am the Lord your God."

These introductory verses provide the starting point for more specific commands. It is as though God is saying, "This is the foundation of good family and community relationships. Aim to be holy, to be different from other nations, to be clean in My eyes through your conduct of obeying My laws. This will separate you."

Note an interesting feature. God draws attention to the fifth, the fourth, and to the first and second commandments as His keys to accomplishing the activation and growth of holiness, first in a family setting and then its spread into the community. This indicates that in God's eyes—in terms of holiness and good family and community relationships—keeping these commands are the major guides and regulators, actually necessities, toward producing family and community success. They provide a foundation for regulating social relationships within both family and community.

Of special interest is the order God sets them in. Both honoring parents—and most specifically the mother, as she is mentioned first—and Sabbath-keeping are mentioned before idolatry. In terms of good family relationships, this is the order the child is introduced to them. In an infant or young child's life, mother is primary. Do not forget, God gives all of this instruction with one common goal in mind: to produce holiness and good family relationships.

Why does God say, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"? It is His way of pointing out to us, His converted children, that He Himself is the Model, the Standard, we are to follow in our child-training practices. As His children, He is the One we are to imitate.

The Importance of Parents

How important to God's purpose are the parents in this mix? God records in Exodus 21:15, 17, "And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. . . . And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death." To modern child psychologists, these are shocking statements. At the very least, they ought to give us pause to realize the seriousness of being constantly concerned about our child-training responsibilities!

These verses do not in any way imply a child is to be beaten into submission. They do mean that it is a tremendously serious responsibility to produce a godly child who glorifies God. Our responsibility is to follow God's patterns in child-training. He is patient and generous with His affections and mercies, yet He also gives correction in due season and in right measure.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 adds:

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 who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city. "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.

Here, the laws given in Exodus 21 are expanded on as the Israelites are about to enter the Land of Promise. If a child were unmanageable and stubbornly disobedient, the judges had a responsibility to back up the parents. However, the right to kill was not given to the parents. This passage indicates a process of evaluation by people not directly, and thus less emotionally, involved. Interestingly, the addictions in the child are directly named. One is a drug addiction, a major problem in our time.

Does it offend us that God's standard is so stern? Do we pass it off as being of little consequence or significance? We should perhaps rethink this. Consider what poor child-training is causing in Britain and America! Does not God prophesy against "the drunkards of Ephraim" (Isaiah 28:1, 3)?

God adds in Deuteronomy 27:16, "Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt." Ephraim (Israel) is under divine punishment, cursed, because parenting and parents are considered to be so unimportant. Why is God so concerned? Notice this comment concerning Exodus 21:12-17 in the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*:

Maltreatment of a father and mother through striking (v. 15), man-stealing (v. 16), and cursing parents (v. 17, cf. Lev 20:9), were all to be placed on a par with murder, and punished in the same way. By the "smiting" (*hikaah*) of parents we are not to understand smiting to death, for in that case *waameet* would be added as in v. 12, but any kind of maltreatment. The murder of parents is not mentioned at all, as not likely to occur and hardly conceivable. The cursing (*qaleel* as in Gen 12:3) of parents is placed on a par with smiting, because it proceeds from the same disposition; and both were to be punished with death, because the majesty of God was violated in the persons of the parents (cf. Ex 20:12). (Vol. 1, p. 133.)

Therein lies a major reason for keeping this commandment. The relationship God intends within the family is an exact type of the Christian's spiritual relationship with God the Father and the church as mother. In the eyes of God and in the eyes of a small child, a parent stands in the place of God Himself. In the physical sense, the parents are the child's creator, provider, lawgiver, teacher, and protector. A child's response to this relationship will in large measure determine his later response to broader relationships in society and beyond that to God Himself.

By direct implication, then, if as parents we represent God, it becomes our obligation to live lives worthy of honor to Him. Ultimately, the responsibility for keeping this commandment falls on the

child. However, by carrying out their responsibilities, the parents clearly lay the foundation for the child keeping the commandment.

Parental Example

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:1, 4: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. . . . And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." The context obviously addresses children and parents. Paul makes it clear that children have a responsibility before God and that keeping the commandment has definite benefits for them to anticipate receiving. This is in agreement with Deuteronomy 4:39-40, with which this article began.

One of the benefits he mentions is the prospect of long life, which also contains an implication of prosperity. Not the least of the additional benefits is the gradual development of understanding and wisdom garnered from the parents, which themselves help to produce long life and prosperity. Thus, in an overall sense, he is reminding children that obedience to truth has its rewards.

Is there an age at which or a circumstance under which the child's responsibility to honor his parents undergoes a change? The answer is both "Yes" and "No," which is why Paul qualifies his charge to children. His qualification is contained within the phrase "in the Lord." It connotes what is within the boundaries of the Lord's way. In all cases, the responsibility to honor one's parents diminishes when a child marries, and his first attention must be given to the spouse. Cleaving to the spouse trumps the honoring of parents. Paul qualifies this a step further by implying that, if the parents demand submission beyond the bounds of Christian conduct, that is, not "in the Lord"—such as commanding a child to give up the Sabbath, lie in their behalf, steal for them, or bow down to an idol—in such cases the child's choice should be to submit to Christ rather than to his parents. Submitting to God's commands trumps submitting to parent's commands that are beyond what God commands us to do in order to stay "in the Lord."

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul directly addresses fathers. Connecting it to Colossians 3:21 will give us a broader view of what Paul is addressing: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged." Mothers can also have this problem, but fathers are by nature far more likely to commit this child-training error. This verse is more clearly rendered, "Do not embitter or exasperate your children lest they become discouraged." The words "to anger," as in the King James Version, are not in the Greek text. The apostle is encouraging parents not to do things to their children like being overbearing, constantly finding fault, and nagging. The final phrase indicates, ". . . for fear that the child will become listless, moody, or sullen."

Paul appeals to parents to train their children thoughtfully, so that their children's characters and personalities are formed without self-esteem being destroyed. He allows for correction, but at the same time he urges patience with the children's inexperience. Correction should never be revenge. It must be given for the child's good but always within measure to the infraction.

His directive in Ephesians 6:4 is stronger; it could easily be translated, "Do not enrage your children to anger." Discouragement, growing from exasperation, tends to lead a person to give up. By contrast, enraging inclines a person to fight back stubbornly. Neither is good, but the anger is the worse of the two.

The words translated as "provoke" and "wrath" are exactly the same word in Greek. The verse can legitimately be rendered as, "Do not enrage your children to enragement." We might say, "Do not arouse your children to rage." Overall, Paul is teaching us not to promote an angry mood or disposition in our children. Doing so may boomerang on us because children will eventually reflect the disposition of the parents. Firmness in correction is fine, but men, especially, must be careful about their temperament when they give correction. Paul is talking about injustice, favoritism, over-correction, neglect, and physical cruelty in correction.

Nurture and Admonition

The English word "nurture" indicates caring for and providing supportive instruction. The underlying Greek word more specifically involves educational feeding or instruction, as if in school or for the purpose of learning a discipline. The word thus covers verbal instruction, chastening, and the use of drills needed to produce Christian character. It does not at all indicate that any of these approaches is even harsh, let alone cruel. However, it suggests that parents follow an organized and consistent plan.

The term "admonition" means a warning, drawing specific attention to verbal instruction. In summary, Paul touches on three areas vital to child training so that children keep the fifth commandment properly. "In the Lord" touches on the standard or quality one is to strive for. "Nurture" indicates what is physically done to and with the child in terms of consistent, regimented training, including discipline. "Admonition" draws attention to what is said and how it is said to the child.

Taken together, then, Paul clearly teaches that child-training is something that can neither be left to chance nor sloughed off with a careless, resigned attitude, as if it were merely a necessary evil. The parents' vision must be long-range. From parents applying right principles consistently will come the gradual development of understanding and wisdom in the children. These are precursors that help produce the promised long life and prosperity in the commandment.

In I Thessalonians 2:7-8, Paul uses himself and his relationship with the Thessalonian congregation as an example:

But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

He says he treated them with the tender affection of a nursing mother, striving hard so that no one could honestly charge him with taking anything from them. They personally witnessed how gently and consistently he dealt with them as a father does his children by appealing and encouraging them to live their lives to glorify God in their conduct.

Ephesians 6:2 states that the fifth commandment is the first commandment with promise. The second commandment contains a very general promise loosely tied to keeping all the commandments. The promise in the fifth commandment is not general but specifically tied to meeting a specific responsibility—honoring parents.

Notice that the commandment does not say, "*Obey* your father and your mother." This is because honoring not only includes obedience but also goes beyond it. Honoring suggests adding to,

glorifying, embellishing, and decorating its object. Obedience can be given in a resentful manner, but honoring requires admiration, respect, even reverence. This quality must be within one's heart, and it is acquired and built upon through thoughtful consideration, even meditation, on the sacrifices and gifts the parents give to the child.

Honoring is something that usually does not happen in the child until adulthood, when the child has his own experiences as a parent to draw upon to appreciate his parent's loving labors. This fact shows us that it is not too late to grow in honoring our parents, and that God is aware, noticing and rewarding with the blessing of long life. Obedience to parents as a child gets one started in the right direction and produces its own rewards.

Yet, the honoring of parents greatly increases the appreciation for them. The real rewards lie in the practice of honoring itself, rewards that affect our place in the Kingdom of God because we have transferred giving honor to our physical parents to giving spiritual and moral honor to God, our spiritual Parent.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 declares this commandment's seriousness to us:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Notice that child-training is directly linked with the first and great commandment. The fifth commandment is aimed directly at parental responsibility. If children grow up not honoring God, the blame largely falls on the parents' shoulders. God intends this vital child-training responsibility to lead children to honoring Him.

That is its goal. It requires consistent and devoted attention. It cannot be accomplished by absent parents. If the parents do not know God, or if their knowledge of Him is shallow, and they are not practicing what they do know, what will they pass on to their children? Worldliness. Both parents must be dedicated and deeply involved in honoring God in their own lives, if their children are going to be prepared to perform the much more rewarding practice of honoring God.