

The Fifth Commandment (1997)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

***Forerunner*, "Personal," June 1997**

In Matthew 22:36 a Pharisee asked Jesus, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" His response shows that He divided the Ten Commandments into two sections or tables. He covers the first four by saying, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment" (verses 37-38). This supersedes all other commandments; none is greater. The second, covering the last six, is similar to it. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (verse 39).

God also arranged each section to begin with the most important command. He placed first the commandment, which, if kept, will ensure the greatest benefit to our lives, both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, if we break this commandment, it will cause the most damage to our worship of God or to the community by virtually ensuring that we will break others. In the first table of the law, this commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:2). In the second, it is the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (verse 12).

Just as the first commandment governs our relationship with God, the fifth commandment is first among those that govern our relationships with men. When we keep it or break it, it affects those relationships. Not only is it chief in this section, it also acts as a bridge between the two tables of the law. When we keep the fifth commandment properly, it leads us to revere and obey God Himself.

Honor means "to give high regard, respect and esteem to; to bring respect or credit to; an outward token, sign or act that manifests high regard." *Respect* means "to have deferential regard for, to treat with propriety and consideration; to regard as inviolable." This honor and respect, though primarily intended by God to be given to parents, are not limited to them. In spirit it includes civil, religious and educational authorities as well. Elisha calls Elijah his father, though they were not related (I Kings 19:20; II Kings 2:12). In I Corinthians 4:14-15, Paul speaks of himself as their father because he had begotten them to God.

Why Honor Our Parents?

Why does God want us to honor our parents? The family is the basic building block or unit of society, thus the stability of the community depends on the stability of the families that comprise it. A person's response to government derives from the parent-child relationship. The lessons and principles learned from honoring, respecting and obeying parents will result in a society stable enough to promote development of the whole person.

Isaiah 3:1-12, describing Judah not long before their captivity, is not far removed from what we are experiencing today. Isaiah gives many examples, but two verses, 5 and 12, will suffice.

The people will be oppressed, every one by another and everyone 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.

Isaiah reveals a society that can be aptly described as "upside down." Those who should be leading are not and those who should not are. A central factor in this is that the immature are leading. A free-wheeling, laissez faire, hedonistic, immoral and irresponsible culture exists. Verses 5 and 12 confirm that family governance and leadership are greatly affected.

Taken to an extreme, dishonoring of parents leads to anarchy, first in the family and then in society, as the decay of this basic component spreads. Eventually, a person will expend much, if not most, of his energies just surviving, effectively destroying the development of spiritual, creative and intellectual qualities essential to his and society's well-being.

Not honoring parents also causes immaturity. Because children do not respect their parents' advice, they grow up missing the significance of much they encounter, and so wisdom comes to them very slowly. In some cases, perhaps they never learn wisdom. Lack of honor manifests itself in self-willed and self-indulgent people who seem to simmer just beneath the point of rebellion. Their motto in life becomes, "Just do it." So they condemn themselves to learning the lessons of life through hard experience, which may be a good teacher, but a painful one.

A second reason God wants us to honor our parents is that the family is also the basic building block of His Kingdom. God describes the Kingdom in family terms. He is the Father, Jesus is the Son, and the church is the Son's bride. We are called sons, daughters and children of the Kingdom. We are created and being created as sons in His image. God also uses terms like "beget," "born" and "grow up."

Immediately after creating Adam and Eve and announcing He was creating them in His image, God established the first institution: the family through marriage. The conclusion is inescapable. The family would play a major role in creating man in God's image. Regarding marriage, family and divorce, Malachi 2:15 says:

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.

The godly principles learned and character built within the human family are, upon conversion, transferable into the spiritual family relationship in the Kingdom of God. Parents are His representatives, and we honor and revere the creative majesty and power of God when we keep this commandment. God expects whatever we learned from honoring our parents to transfer into our relationship with Him.

A Regulator of Community Relationships

Notice how powerfully God backs up this commandment with civil laws:

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 his father, and keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:2-3)

In this context God names the fifth and fourth commandments in the same breath while implying the first.

Leviticus 19 deals with social relationships within the community, and these commandments are seen as major regulators of community relationships. God gives all of these laws with a common thought in mind: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." These laws are given because the Lawgiver is God (see verses 4, 10, 12, etc.).

They are not primarily statements of authority ("Do this because I tell you"), though some of this is included, but statements of the relationship between the Lawgiver and His law. The laws reflect His nature. The law is what it is because God is what He is. Therefore, if we want to be like God, we will imitate Him by obeying His laws in their physical and spiritual applications.

The first thing required in this context is *reverence* (not honor) toward parents and Sabbath observance. These two are major pillars of good government and social well-being. Reverence is a profound, adoring and awed respect—more than mere honor. It actually indicates "to tremble before," arising from our awareness of our weaknesses in the presence of the one we revere.

The Sabbath commandment influences social well-being in two ways. It first commands us to work six days. It takes working to make a community safe, clean, orderly, strong, peaceful and prosperous. The other part of the commandment implies spiritual, moral and ethical instruction, fellowshiping with others of like spiritual and moral mindset and service to the community. That part of the commandment adds edifying qualities available nowhere else.

Disobedience to Parents

Notice how seriously God takes the breaking of the fifth commandment: "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" (Exodus 21:15, 17). Physically striking or verbally abusing a parent is no different to God than murder. They are capital crimes worthy of death!

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 covers habitually rebellious children:

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 the 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 person from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear.

If a child was unmanageable, stubborn and disobedient, God empowered the judges to back up the parents. However, regardless of their level of exasperation, the parents had no right to put to their child to death. The elders of the city tried the child, evidence was presented, and they executed the judgment.

It is interesting that the parents charge their son with drunkenness. It does not mean a one-time binge but repeated offenses implying alcoholism, which is a drug addiction. Drug addiction is a major problem today. The wisdom of God reveals this alternative for dealing with it. Is it offensive that God is so stern? He does not pass this problem off as of little consequence or significance! Look at what it is doing to American society.

Deuteronomy 27:16 has this interesting assessment. "Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt." Such a person is living under divine punishment. God is faithful to what He is for good or ill. There are no hollow threats from God. Many today live cursed lives because of the way they treated or are still treating their parents. Why is God so concerned?

The *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* (vol. 1, p. 133), commenting on Exodus 21:15-17, reads:

Maltreatment of a father and mother through striking (ver. 15), man-stealing (ver. 16), and cursing parents (ver. 17, cf. Leviticus xx.9) were all to be placed on a par with murder, and punished in the same way. By "*smiting*" of parents we are not to understand smiting to death, . . . but any kind of maltreatment. The murder of parents is not mentioned at all, as not likely to occur and hardly conceivable. The *cursing 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.

"The majesty of God was violated"! In this lies the importance of keeping this commandment. The relationship God intends within the family is an exact type of a Christian's spiritual relationship with God the Father and the church as mother.

Training Children

In God's eyes—and in a small child's—a parent stands in the place of God Himself. In the physical sense, parents are the child's creator, provider, lawgiver, teacher and protector and sometimes even savior. A child's response to this relationship will greatly determine his later response to larger relationships in society. And it is ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN to affect his relationship with God. Thus, since parents represent God, it becomes their **obligation** to live lives worthy of that honor. Ultimately, the responsibility for keeping this commandment falls on the child, but it *begins* with the parents through child training and example. If parents neither provide the correct example nor teach the correct way, they can hardly expect their children to honor them.

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul admonishes, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." We need to consider a number of factors in this verse. First, just because he says "fathers," he does not exclude mothers. Paul simply addresses the party with the overall responsibility.

Second, though it is not directly stated, we must remember that God consistently teaches that the strong are responsible to care for the weak. In this context, the parents are strong, the children are weak. However, parents must not depend upon their size and strength to demand respect, but should strive to earn it through strength of character, wisdom and clearly expressed love.

The Greek word translated "bring them up" at first meant merely providing bodily nourishment. Through time its usage extended to include education in its entirety since bringing up children obviously is more than just feeding a child food! "Training" is more correct than the weak "nurture" used in the KJV. The Greek word means "to train or discipline by repeated and narrow exercises in a matter." It implies action more than intellectual thought and corresponds to the word "train" in

Proverbs 22:6, which means "to hedge" or "narrow in." Thus God expects parents to train their children to walk the straight and narrow way rather than allowing them to wander aimlessly about on the broad way.

Paul adds in Colossians 3:21, "Fathers, do not provoke your children lest they become discouraged." To some degree, all children resist their parents and what they represent and teach. How parents overcome it is Paul's concern. These verses testify that many parents strive to elicit their children's obedience and respect in the wrong manner.

The wrong way provokes embittered, fretful, defensive, listless, resentful, moody, angry or sullen children. Paul counsels not to challenge the child's resistance with an unreasonable exercise of authority. Correction is necessary, but a parent must administer it in the right spirit, counterbalanced by lavish affection and acceptance. A twig should be bent with caution.

Firmness does not need to be harsh nor cruel. Punishment should never be revenge nor dispensed just because the parent is irritated. Severity only hardens the child and makes him more desperate. If a parent does not use his authority justly, he cannot expect a child to be respectful. It does not happen automatically.

Notice how Paul describes his attitude and relationship to the Thessalonian brethren:

You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (I Thessalonians 2:10-12)

Paul exhorted, comforted and charged them. That is a very good prescription for earning the honor of children.

A Child's Part

By way of contrast, Paul instructs children in Ephesians 6:1-3. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother,' which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'" The command to honor parents applies to all of us all our lives. But here, as in Colossians 3:20, children should obey their parents in all things "in the Lord."

The apostle is not saying a child must break the Ten Commandments if a parent orders him to so. Children should obey "in the Lord," that is, obey commands that agree with the will of God. Most younger children cannot grasp whether a parental order conforms to God's will. But as they age, they need to understand that they, too, are under the authority of the Living Christ.

Though parents have a huge part in starting children off on the right foot regarding this commandment, the greater responsibility for keeping it rests with the child. At some point, children need to realize that their submission to parents is an act of faith in Christ. Their required obedience is not based on any arbitrary power held by parents but on a higher law to which parents are also subject. Parents have a primary responsibility to teach their children to discipline, govern or control *themselves* under God's law. Children must learn that they cannot always do what they want when they want, or have what they want when they want it.

Keeping this commandment brings great benefits, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:2, "which is the first commandment with promise." The promise of blessing for keeping it written right into the commandment! God promises, "That it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

This blessing has at least two parts. Obedience to parental admonitions, gained from years of experience living in this difficult and dangerous world, results in the building of knowledge, character and habits of avoiding recklessness, lawlessness, violence, wrong companionships and rebellion against authority. These often result in untimely and violent death at a young age. Virtually every year this comes to the fore when statistics show that accidents are our children's number one killer.

The second and ultimate meaning is that, in honoring our spiritual Father, God, we receive spiritual blessings far above long physical life. From the loving relationship between God and his child will arise eternal life, which God will give as a gift to a son who pleases Him.

Honoring Our Parents

Obedience to this command does not stop at a certain age. Genesis 48:12 reveals the deep respect Joseph had for Jacob when he brought his two sons before him for a blessing: "So Joseph brought them from beside his knees, and he bowed down with his face to the earth." With adulthood, the time may come when it is no longer necessary or right for a person to obey his parents strictly. But God's requirement to honor them never ceases. This duty pays dividends by giving us access to the wisdom of years.

Honor has wider application than obey. It expresses itself in courtesy, thoughtfulness, mercy and kindly deeds. We would hardly consider one to be honoring his parents who, when they fall sick, weak and perhaps blind in old age, does not exert himself to the utmost for them and their support in their need.

Just as surely as God requires parents to nourish, defend, support and instruct the children in their lowest state of infancy, so children in their strength should support their parents in their weakness. Turn about is fair play because the Scripture says, "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (Matthew 7:12). Each of us would want someone to care for us in our time of need.

Jesus points out how serious this is in Matthew 15:3-6:

But He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me has been dedicated to the temple" is released from honoring his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition."

Today, it is a common practice to turn parents over to a government agency and fail to provide anything—not even visits! It is almost as if they were an old automobile to be traded in and forgotten.

Behind these Scriptures is a practice whereby people excused themselves from providing for their parents on the grounds of giving offerings (not tithes) to the Temple. On the surface this may seem like an honorable practice, but Jesus condemned them as hypocrites! God wants mercy to people in

need, not the "sacrifice" of an offering to God that we think might put us in better standing with Him. That "sacrifice" should have been spent relieving the parent's need!

Jesus quotes Exodus 21:17 as His authority. "Curses" implies afflicting, bringing evil upon or causing harm or misfortune to. The person who curses a parent, even under the New Covenant, breaks the fifth commandment and is worthy of death. These are sobering words regarding a serious obligation.

Paul clarifies our responsibility further in I Timothy 5:3-4, 16:

Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. . . . If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.

What Paul says here often presents great difficulties under modern conditions, especially when young people must choose between caring for parents and furthering their ambitions or establishing a home. Paul teaches that not only children but also grandchildren have a definite obligation to live their religion by providing for their needy parents or grandparents. He bluntly states that they are to repay them for all their kindness and sacrifices. A child can never wholly repay this debt, but still he should consider it a sacred obligation to make it up as much as possible.

Jesus lived what He taught. Luke 2:51-52 shows that, despite His brilliance and undoubted understanding of who He was even at age twelve, He honored His earthly parents:

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and *was subject to them*, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

John 19:25-27 reveals another side of His sense of responsibility in this area:

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

Just because He was God's Son did not allow Him to forego His earthly obligations. He faithfully fulfilled human duties. Even at a time others would think only of self, He thought of her.

Proverbs About Honoring Parents

The book of Proverbs contains many pointed admonitions concerning the importance of keeping this commandment. We would be wise to consider these concepts ageless and not intended just for children.

Notice the contrast in these two proverbs: "A wise son makes a glad father; but a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (10:1). "Whoever curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in deep

darkness" (20:20). A son who is wise (that is, he honors his parents) gives his father and mother satisfaction by the way he lives. Solomon invites young people to consider how their actions affect their parents. Parents usually think it is their duty to make their children happy, but many proverbs urge children to bring happiness to their parents. Proverbs reveals the parent-child relationship as a two-way street; each affects the other.

Proverbs 20:20 soberly warns that children who treat their parents lightly or contemptuously, who pay them and their word no heed, are headed for failure that may include death. They are putting themselves "behind the eight-ball" by developing habits of disregard of those who are more experienced and wiser.

Proverbs 30:17 describes an even more sobering end for those who fail to keep this commandment: "The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it." What a gruesome end for those guilty of this! In this figure of speech, an outward manifestation (a mocking eye) represents the unseen cause in the heart (scorn, disrespect). Over the short term, the inner cause produces stress-filled family disturbances. Over the long term, though, it produces even more distressing and serious consequences—even death.

At the beginning of Proverbs, Solomon, after stating his specific purpose for writing and laying a brief foundation, tells to whom he is writing: "my son" (1:8). We understand the book is primarily addressed to all of God's household and secondarily to the children of His regenerated sons and daughters. One of his first pieces of advice is, "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be graceful ornaments on your head, and chains about your neck" (verses 8-9).

Life begins at home and wisdom should begin there too. The home is the primary and most vital factor in a child's development into a mature and stable member of society. Church and school play secondary roles, if only because of the amount of time spent at home and all the personal interaction that takes place there.

In keeping this commandment, the Bible divides responsibility between parents and child, even though the child eventually bears the greater responsibility. It is his responsibility to learn from his parents, not just because they are his human lifegivers, but because the parents have been what the child has not—both young and old.

Therefore, parents should have accrued wisdom from situations the child has not yet experienced. It is the parents' responsibility to create an environment in which they can pass wisdom on so that the child can learn the lessons of life more easily. And so society benefits from the resulting stability of that family unit.

If the child learns these lessons, the wisdom will be an enriching ornament, a sign of honor and a guide to long life and prosperity. These are the fulfillment of the fifth commandment's promise. The process begun in the home then prepares the way into the Kingdom of God.