

WEEK 6: HONOR FATHER AND MOTHER

FIFTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16



The Place of the Passage

The fifth commandment is traditionally identified as the start of the Decalogue's second table: six commandments about loving one's neighbor after four commandments about loving God. The fifth commandment shows that honoring parents is the starting place for right relationships with others. But this command is also part of the Law's first table. The fifth commandment is like a hinge connecting both tables of the Law, concluding the commands about loving God as well as introducing the commands about loving others. The reason to honor parents stated in the commandment itself is to continue the community's life in the presence of God in his land: "Honor your father and your mother, *that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you*" (Ex. 20:12). Honoring parents is how the heritage of faith—and one's growth in relationship to God—is passed from each generation to the next.

The Big Picture

A chief role of human authority, beginning with parents, is to foster right relationships with God and others.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the fifth commandment in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Also read Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 17:8–20 about other authorities in Israel in addition to parents. Use the following questions to help you consider this commandment’s meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176, 340; online at www.esv.org.)

The Nature of Parental Authority

The fifth commandment applies to all proper authorities, beginning with but not limited to parents. In Israel all authorities were viewed as extensions of parental authority, which is itself an extension of God’s authority. God called Abraham and made him the father of a small family. As Abraham’s family grew into tribes and then a kingdom, its authority structures expanded. But those expanded offices were extensions of parental authority. In Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 17:8–20, what are some of the offices appointed for Israel as they grow?

The Deuteronomy version of this commandment adds a phrase not found in its Exodus parallel. What is that added phrase, and how does it emphasize the delegated nature of human authority?

Obedience to authority serves a good purpose. It is not owed blindly to illegitimate authorities. What are some of the limitations placed on offices of authority in biblical Israel (Deut. 16:18–20; 17:8–20), and what do these limitations teach us about the nature of divinely sanctioned authority (Rom. 13:1–7)?

Honor

The command is to “honor” parents, which includes more than obedience. What else do you understand to be involved in honoring authorities? What are some examples of how honor is shown differently to different authorities, based on what is due to each?

When an authority commands something morally wrong (Acts 5:29), how might a person honor that authority even by the way in which he or she disobeys?

What are some of the lessons about faith and life that God has used your parents to instill into your life? How have you recently shown honor to them?

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Read Jesus’ remarks in Mark 7:6–13 about how religious leaders of his day created loopholes to escape the duties of parental care. What are some of the excuses you are tempted to offer in order to justify neglect of the time and care due to your parents?

The Promise

The apostle Paul calls this the “first commandment with a promise” (Eph. 6:2). That promise was for a long and good life “in the land,” originally referring to the settlement of Canaan. But Paul quotes that promise to Gentile Christians living in Ephesus! How does this promise apply to New Testament Christians? What is the significance of Paul’s command for children to obey their parents “in the Lord” (v. 1)?

Two qualities of life are promised in this commandment. It promises a life that is “long” and a life in which “it may go well with you.” These are promises for individuals but especially for the thriving of the community as a whole. How did this commandment find fulfillment in the experience of Israel as a community in the land?

When a farmer passes the farm to his children, the rising generation must learn to maintain the farm, if it is to continue. In like manner, this commandment is about learning to maintain the community in “the land that the LORD your

God is giving you.” What implications does this commandment have for the life and growth of your local church congregation?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

DWELLING WITH GOD. The hope of the gospel is that a redeemed community will dwell with God in his unhindered blessings of life and goodness. That is what this commandment promises to those who honor the heritage of faith passed down from generation to generation. What this commandment promises for our imperfect experience in the present world is the same reality we will receive in greater measure in the eternal kingdom.

GOD’S GIFTS. This commandment does not present life in the land as something the people would earn through obedience. On the contrary, God gave his people the land first and called for their obedience in response to that gift. His command to obey is guidance to steward the gift, not to earn it. Such is the nature of the gospel.

JESUS KEPT THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT. As a child, Jesus was submissive to his parents (Luke 2:51) and attentive to the heritage of faith passed on from his elders (Luke 2:46–47). At the end of his earthly life, Jesus ensured that his mother was taken care of when he could no longer care for her himself (John 19:26–27). Even though Jesus was sometimes misunderstood by his mother (Mark 3:31–35), he continued to honor her. He famously confronted the errors of the religious leaders of his day, but he also affirmed the authority of their positions (Matt. 23:2). He further recognized the authority of civil rulers (John 19:10–11), even paying taxes (Matt. 17:24–27; 22:17–21). Jesus was to receive authority over all (Matt. 28:18), yet he came to serve (Phil. 2:6–7). He perfectly kept the law, including the fifth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE LAND. From the garden of Eden to Israel's settlement of Canaan and its postexilic return and beyond, the biblical story takes place around the gift, loss, and restoration of the land. The theme of land in the Bible is about much more than real estate, however. To speak of a certain land is to speak of the community identified by that place. God told Abraham that the land of Canaan would be the launching point for a community that would one day fill the whole earth (Gen. 12:2–3). The fifth commandment is part of that whole-Bible lesson, depicting a community of life and goodness beginning in one specific land but spreading into all lands.

PARENTS. The role of parents in the biblical story cannot be overemphasized: Adam and Eve; Noah and his wife; the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives; the twelve sons of the Jacob and their wives; Moses and Ziporah; and so on. Family dysfunction and family renewal are at the heart of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. The fifth commandment highlights the important role of parents and the family in God's plan throughout Scripture.

Theological Soundings

HONOR. The Hebrew word for “honor” means “to regard as weighty.” Used literally,¹ the term describes something or someone who is very heavy (1 Sam. 4:18). Used metaphorically,² as in this commandment, it means to regard someone with the respect due to the greatness (weightiness) of that person's role. Parenting is a weighty task, both in the burdens it entails and in its importance before God. Parents, even imperfect ones, deserve great honor for the heavy burdens they carry out of love for their children.

AUTHORITY FROM GOD. Paul taught the Christians in Rome that even Roman authorities deserved honor, since all authority derives from God (Rom. 13:1–7). The fifth commandment lays down that principle by linking the call to honor parents to the command from God to do so. All human authority—parental or governmental or otherwise—is delegated from God, the true source of authority. There are two sides to this truth. Those under authority are to honor leaders out of reverence for God. But those *in* authority are authorized to administer true justice (Deut. 16:18–20) only as “ministers of God” (Rom. 13:6).

PARENTAL NURTURE. As with all commandments of the Decalogue, this command requires what is implicit as well as what is explicit. The commandment explicates the reverence due to those in authority by those under authority.

But it also teaches implicitly the duty of authorities to use their authority to bring about the life and goodness of their communities. Those in leadership are responsible to guide their followers in ways that bring about goodness and continued possession of the land. The apostle Paul picks up on both sides of this command—the explicit duties of children and the implicit duties of parents—in his exposition on this commandment for the Ephesians (Eph. 6:1–4).

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s fifth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through fifth commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Literal** – A method of communication in which words are intended to be understood according to their normally defined meaning. This is in contrast to figurative, analogical, or symbolic methods of communication.

² **Metaphor** – A figure of speech that draws an analogy between two objects by equating them, even though they are not actually the same thing. An example is Psalm 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”