

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT HONOUR THY FATHER AND MOTHER

Reading: Colossians 3:12-23

Today's sermon is the next in a series on the Ten Commandments. Peter has already covered the first four commandments that deal with the 'vertical' aspect of our Christian lives – our relationship with God. The remaining six deal with the horizontal aspect of our Christian lives – our relationships with each other. Today we're going to be looking at the first of these 'horizontal' commandments which we find in Exodus 20:12

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

I think God must have been chuckling when I volunteered to lead the service today, because I certainly can't claim to have kept this commandment when I was a youngster. Those of you who know me well will know that I had quite a difficult childhood and I expressed my dissatisfaction with my parents rather than honouring them. At the age of four or five I locked my Mother out of the house and refused to let her back in until she went down on her knees and begged. As an older child, I remember that the happiest day of my life was on leaving home at the age of 17 and I didn't contact my parents for some years after that. I definitely didn't honour my parents with my behaviour, or indeed at all.

This command is the first of horizontal commands governing our relations with each other, so we may be sure that is an extremely important command. I think that is also shown by the fact that it is the only one of the ten commandments which has a promise – so that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you – attached to it. We're going to return to what that promise means later. Certainly, it was an important command for the Israelites as breaking

it was a capital offence for which the son was stoned to death – Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and Exodus 21:15, 17.

Jesus also clearly thought it was important. He reaffirmed it (including the death penalty that went with it) and berated the Pharisees for encouraging Jewish youths to deny financial support to their parents and instead give the money to the Temple (Matthew 15:4-6). He also cited it as one of the important commands which the rich young ruler should obey (Matthew 19:19) and he often spoke of honouring His Father (John 8:49).

The command is also often cited with approval in Paul's epistles in the New Testament, such as in our reading today and in Ephesians chapter 6.

But, what does it mean for us today? Although the Old Testament commandments are no longer Law for Christians today in the sense that they were Law for the Israelites – because we have been released from the Law by the New Covenant in Christ – we must take these commandments seriously, especially where they are enthusiastically affirmed in the New Testament. Thus, it remains the task of the church to continue to proclaim this command today, even – perhaps especially – in a world where we find it difficult to define the terms 'father' and 'mother' any more. There are biological fathers and mothers who may or may not live with and care for their children. There are step parents, adoptive parents, surrogate parents and in-laws and even people of no relation whatsoever who fulfil some of the roles of parents in our lives. So exactly whom does this command cover?

Even when we have defined *who* it covers, does it matter *how* they behave as parents. What if they are abusive, neglectful or criminal? What if the demands of the two (or more) parents are in conflict – for example in a divorce situation? What about turning in a drug abusing parent or a parent molesting a sibling?

I think we have to start by looking at what it means to honour our parents. Dr Samuel Johnson defined honour as ‘a scorn of meanness’ and a modern dictionary definition is ‘deferential recognition of another’s worth or station’. I rather like original meaning of the Hebrew word translated as ‘honour’ which was ‘to give weight to’. Modern writers often speak of this command as if it only spoke of ‘obedience’ to our parents, probably because Paul uses that word when he speaks of this commandment in Ephesians chapter 6:1 saying:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

However, Paul obviously thought the command was wider than that, because in the next verse he says:

"Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—

thus implying that he considered obedience to be only a part of ‘honouring’. We should also note that he qualified the word ‘obey’ by the words ‘in the Lord’. We are only required to obey our parents insofar as what they command is within God’s Laws and not dishonouring to Him.

I believe we should interpret this command as meaning that children should give due weight, respect (which will normally include obedience), value and recognition to their parents. Adult ‘children’ should continue to treat their parents with respect and seriousness and to support them appropriately as they grow older. As with any other passage of scripture, we have to consider the message of scripture as a whole and not just one commandment. We need to look at issues such as violation of other scriptural laws, or indeed issues of breaking man made laws – which, as a general rule, scripture adjures us to keep.

We must also bear in mind that our parents generally have a wealth of experience. Thus Mark Twain said when I was 14 I couldn’t believe

how stupid my father was. By the time I was 21 I realised he had become quite smart. I couldn't believe just how much he had learned in just 7 years.

In my view adult children are not called into automatic obedience – a duty to always do what their parents want – rather they must consider all the needs and conditions applicable to both the parents and the situation and strive to do what is best and honouring to God.

I don't believe that the duty of adult children to support parents means that they must *personally* care for them no matter the cost to the rest of their family or their calling in the Lord – after all Jesus himself delegated the care of His mother to the disciple John when His Father called Him to go to His death on the cross (John 19:25-27). Thus I don't believe it is necessarily dishonouring to put a parent into a nursing home – especially if taking them into our home would mean that we couldn't properly care for our spouse and our own children. But, I do believe it would be dishonouring to leave our parents to waste away in a nursing home where we don't telephone or visit or to use a nursing home just as a place to dispose of them. This is not giving them respect or giving due weight to their needs.

Turning now to the issue of *who* this commandment applies to, I believe it can and should be broadened well beyond the persons who are our biological mothers and fathers. I think honour thy father and mother can be applied to adoptive parents, step parents, foster parents, carers and indeed all who fulfil what is essentially a parental role.

Let's move on to other broader issues surrounding this command, some of which were addressed in our reading today. We see that honouring parents is not meant to be a one way street – parents have a responsibility to conduct themselves so as to be worthy of honour. Parents also have a responsibility to deal wisely and not excessively harshly with their children so that their children will be encouraged and not driven into bad tempered and surly behaviour. As it says in verse 21 of our reading today

Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

So how should we conduct ourselves as parents? Firstly, we should be faithful and fair. This doesn't mean that we should not be firm. When the occasion demands we *must* be firm – children want and need limits -, but our words and actions should be tempered by love. We must also be constant so that our children learn without confusion.

Parents should also lead their children to God and train them properly. As it says in Ephesians 6:4

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Finally, all parents must give their children all the love they can.

Our reading also tells us that this command is meant to fit into the wider context of the family. Although it is unpopular, almost unacceptable, in our individualistic, post-modern society, I really believe wives are meant to set an example for our children. As it says in verse 18 of our reading

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Of course, this is to be seen in the context of the greater duty of the husband towards the wife set out in the following verse

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Indeed in Ephesians chapter 6 Paul tells us that husbands must love their wives to the point of dying for them.

Here we need to bear in mind that an attitude of true love by the husband will be a sacrificial love and will show full regard by the husband for all the needs and desires of the wife.

BOTH husbands and wives must train their children to love and honour them as parents by the love and honour they show to each other as husband and wife. Thus the proper order in God's kingdom is 'Husbands love your wives', 'wives obey your husbands', 'children honour your parents', and then 'fathers don't provoke your children'.

Lack of adherence to these and other Biblical and Godly principles is precisely why we see our society in such disarray today. We see an enormous increase in crime, lawbreaking and violence. Let us remember that breaking the laws of our parents is but one step away from breaking the laws of our society.

What about the promise attached to today's commandment? This is often interpreted as a promise of individual long life to those who obey the command to honour their parents. However, I don't think that is by any means the whole of its meaning. I think the first 'you' in the promise

so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

refers to the Israelite nation as a whole rather than an individual 'you'. This makes much more sense of the remainder of the promise about living long in the land that God is giving them. It also fits well with the comments about the breakdown of law and order and society generally that I was just making.

I think we can also interpret the promise and indeed the whole command in terms of honouring our heavenly Father, who will give us not merely long life, but eternal life.

Continuing with the dual nature of this command, we see that there is clearly a demand to honour our earthly parents, but that it equally calls us to honour our heavenly Father and, in complete obedience to both aspects, we will be blessed by the promise with long life as nations and eternal life as individuals.

Finally, I just want to say that honouring our earthly fathers and mothers is no more than doing for them what God does for us every day – and in this crass, violent and vulgar world, what a witness that is to our God whose nature is love.

Let's just finish with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father, we see that obeying your good rules for our lives is not only honouring to you but essential to our peace and happiness through the good ordering of our relations with each other. Give us the desire and strength to keep your commandments through the power of Your Holy Spirit we pray in Jesus' name Amen.