

Just Honor Your Father and Mother – and...

Exodus 20:12

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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What is “honor?” That’s the key word here, isn’t it? What does it mean? The Hebrew verb behind “honor” is really wide-ranging. All of the meanings are positive. Some of them are just plain powerful. It can mean things like “prizing highly,” “exalting,” “glorifying,” other terms that sound like worship, and maybe are. One commentator actually says “honor” is about worship, means worship. But there’s more: the word carries meanings of respect, and care, and really comes close to what Jesus means when he says “love.” So this commandment seems to be telling us to *love* our parents!

Now, there’s a word of caution here. You don’t ever worship things that don’t deserve worship – that’s idolatry, and we’ve already sort of covered that with the second commandment. Making parents into an image of God would break that commandment, so let’s don’t go there! Let’s make sure to say that if parents want to be “honored,” then they need to behave towards their children in an “honorable” manner. Paul, in the 6th chapter of Ephesians, says this:

"Honor your father and mother" — this is the first commandment with a promise: "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Parents aren’t allowed to abuse or mistreat their children, or to ignore or neglect them; indeed, parents are responsible to God to make sure that “it may be well with them and

they may live long on the earth.” I think God knows: It’s only natural for children to love parents like that!

Well, why bother with making that into a commandment?! Do we really need to be told to do that? Is there a need for a commandment along those lines? Sadly, the answer appears to be – yes. It seems that in some quarters, people in Israel’s day might have taken “honor” to mean “obey.” What parents are, they’re somebody to *obey*. Once your parents lost the ability to make you obey them, “honor” them; or once their abilities had slipped enough in their old age that they weren’t any longer “honorable,” however that works, then somehow people stopped looking out for, stopped “honoring” their parents. They just got ignored, or pushed aside. It seems the old folks got pushed out of the homes, even! They didn’t have a venerated, guaranteed place. God took care of that with this commandment! God made sure that his people were going to do what was right.

So then if it’s not about obedience, what *is* it about? It’s about having the kind of social order, and therefore the kind of life, that God wants for his people. God doesn’t want a society where the wisest of his people are shunted aside – let’s use that wisdom! God surely doesn’t want a culture where people live in fear as they age – instead, let that age and experience be celebrated. We all are going to age, unless something bad happens early. Should we live in fear of that? Besides, we’re all picking up knowledge, all of the time. When we take all that experience of our elders, and apply it to our new experiences, it can’t help but benefit us, and make everybody’s lives better.

What does “honoring” look like? I know what it used to look like. Families used to be all together. I mean that grandparents, parents, kids, all lived under the same roof for a long time. That’s the way it was in ancient Israel, and that’s the way it used to be in our own country. The older folks were revered. They might not have actually been the heads of the household, but they were looked up to by everyone. And they were loved. Down to the youngest kid, you weren’t going to do anything to hurt grandma or granddad. It wasn’t about punishment, either, it was about care. It was about all those things we just talked about, that come under the term “honor.” And grandparents loved back. You could always go to them when you needed support, somebody to listen to you or to cheer you up. To give you good advice, when you didn’t know what to do. I really think that giving “honor” rubbed off on relations with the parents, too. Kids had the same sort of love and respect for parents. Do you remember how it was, in those days? Of course, not *every* household was like that! – but most were, and I think we’ve lost something. I talk often about how “righteousness” is all about “right relationships” with people. It’s not just about relationships being *correct* or morally *right* somehow; it’s about them *working well*. Honoring parents is righteous, because that works well for everyone. It’s a shame we’ve lost that, or at least that so many have.

Well, what have we lost? The world has changed a lot, and I think my generation has much to do with that. Us “baby boomers” face a dilemma new to our history. The expectation of our culture is this: Everybody should have a place of their own. As soon as you graduate from high school or college, you’re supposed to move away from family, and be your own man or woman. Get out of the house! That means you’ve

moved away from the ones you're supposed to honor. How can you honor someone when you're not around?

The other part of the dilemma is that from the beginning of the "baby boomer" age, we've all fallen behind in our earning. None of us is all that secure, when it comes to retirement time. And here's the rub: because everybody lives longer, due to our modern medicine, our parents are still around into their eighties and nineties, still needing our care. Some of us are barely able to take care of ourselves, because of the ridiculous expectations of a living standard. If "honor" means "support," how can we do it if we don't have the means? This last thing is particularly troubling. The growth in nursing homes and retirement centers is because so many people are living beyond the limits of the care their loved ones can give them. Most families now have both husband and wife working until retirement or near-retirement in order to educate children, and pay off things like incredible mortgages and huge medical bills – some of them from their parents. Are we not "honoring" them if we can't give the care ourselves?

What is the bottom line on this commandment? I think it goes back to what we said earlier. This commandment is total and complete love. I said earlier I wondered if we really needed to be told to love our parents. I think we need to be told that this commandment is God telling us to completely love. And that means more than a blind set of duties or a list of actions. What if you can't give great care yourself? Isn't it the loving thing to do to see to it that your parent gets the best care money can buy? Then taking your time to see them when you have the time? What about being honest with a parent who's about to make a ruinous decision financially – say with something that

looks like a scam? That ensuing argument might not sound like “honoring” – but it sure sounds like caring. See, love sometimes isn’t exactly pretty! – but it’s always deep. And it’s always blessed by God.

So why did God give us this commandment? Look at what we get when we follow it. We revere wisdom, and we get it; we respect others who have life experience, and we get to share it; we learn to love others, and we receive their love; we actually are loving those who created us, since that’s what parents are, the ones who created us by giving us birth. We learn from an early age to work together in a structured environment. Don’t all these things sound kinda useful for when you get out into the world? I think so! The proverb is true: “It all starts at home.” I think we can say that this commandment is not only about doing the right thing for family, but about God giving us a gift of order for our lives. You know what that ultimately means! If you follow this commandment, and if you think through its implications for all of your life, then you’re just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you.