

Ex 20:12; Eph 6:2-3 (1984 NIV)
Honour Your Parents

Introduction

The Bible tells us in Ex 20:12 to “honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you”.

Paul quoted this verse with modification in Eph 6:2-3 this way—“Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

Why did Paul quote this OT verse?—because he wanted the readers and hearers of his letter to follow it as an instruction from God to them. And who were the readers and hearers of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians? They were Christians. What this implies is that this verse on honouring parents, originally embodied as part of the 10 Commandments, is not only for the Israelites (or Jews), but also for Christians—i.e. for you and me today.

The Newsweek issue dated 12 May 2008 (p. 49) ran a story of the late Paul Moore who was the Episcopal bishop of New York from 1972-1989. He had a daughter named Honor.

One day, not long after his death, Honor received a call. The man at the other end of the line introduced himself as an old friend of the late bishop. In fact, he repeatedly mentioned how close he had been to Honor’s father for 30 years.

Probing further, Honor braved this question, “Have my father ever confided in you about his sexual life?” You see, it was already an open secret at least in the family that the late Paul Moore was a bisexual. The man answered, “I am his sexual life.”

What Newsweek had published was actually an excerpt of Honor’s memoir in which she revealed her late father’s family secret openly. Even more, she also revealed in that same memoir her own affairs with men and women in her life—like father, like daughter.

The title of that excerpt in Newsweek was “Honor Thy Father”. When the Bible teaches us to honour our father and mother, this is not what it is all about.

What does God have in mind when He commands us in the Bible to honour our parents? To answer this, we first need ...

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I. Some background understanding about the 5th Commandment

Paul's version of this commandment in Eph 6:1-3 says that it is the first commandment. This does not mean that it is first in terms of importance. Rather, it is first in that it is the first commandment in Ex 20 to spell out for us our duties to other human beings. The earlier four commandments before it deal with our duties to God.

Paul's version says that this commandment is the first commandment with a promise. What is this promise? The promise is that "all may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth". Now, notice that this rendering is different from that in Ex 20:12. In the OT verse, we are told that the promise is about living long "in the land the LORD your God is giving you". This OT version is a promise to the Israelites about living long in the promised land of Canaan. But when Paul used this OT verse to address his readers and hearers who were both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians in Eph 6:1-3, he modified "living long in Canaan land" to "living long on earth" so that it would be relevant to the time of his audience.

Strong families are the building blocks of strong communities, and strong communities are the building blocks of strong nations—that's what it means to survive or live long on earth. It is a promise directed more to a collective people than to individual persons.

In the OT, the laws of God are embodied in all the commandments, and to be conveyed to subsequent generations from parents to their children. Thus, the 5th Commandment plays a very vital role with respect to the other commandments. Why?—because if subsequent generations are to hear and keep God's laws in the commandments, they must first respect and honour their parents—the ones who have been assigned by God to teach His laws to them. Hence, the honouring of parents is a prerequisite if God's laws are to be taught and passed down from one generation to another.

If children honour their parents from young, they will heed their teaching. If they heed their parents' teaching from young, they will keep the laws of God. If they keep the laws of God from young, they will not harm their fellow Israelites. And if they do not harm one another from young, they will live long and survive together as a nation of people. Thus, the 5th Commandment goes beyond protecting and preserving the family to protecting and preserving the nation.

To honour a person is to make that person heavy or weighty. The Hebrew word for "honour" (*cahbeid*) in the 5th Commandment means to "give weight or importance". In this sense, the Bible doesn't pretend that honouring our parents are always light and easy. On one hand, to honour is to give importance and

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weight to our parents. On the other hand, to give honour is a heavy responsibility and weighty task on the part of the child. To honour a parent is to give weight to him/her by granting him/her a place of respect and even authority in one's life. Thus, honour is often accompanied by appropriate attention and obedience, and it is incomplete without action.

Respect for authority begins at home. The child who grows up saying, "Nobody can tell me what to do!" is going to have a hard time in life. There are a lot of times you have to do what somebody tells you to do whether you like it or not. So God wants us to learn to respect authority. God says He put parents in a position of authority over children in their early age. So we are to respect it.

With this background understanding, we will now construct ...

II. Some broad perspectives for Christian living

First, if God commands children to honour their parents, then parenting must be viewed as an honourable calling. In today's world, bearing and raising children may be viewed as something far less than a blessing. Little wonder that birth rates are falling—childbirths and child-rearing are seen as undesirable or burdensome. But if you are a fulltime homemaker and give your life to raising children at home, and somehow feel like a lesser person, take heart—you are pleasing to God because He views parenting as an honourable calling. Even if you are a working parent and have a very competent maid at home, remember that no matter how caring that maid is to your child, she is still the maid and not the parent. You are the parent—God has called you to be that.

Second, honouring parents does not mean seeing them as perfect people. I like to believe that parents will almost always be well-intentioned towards their children. However, how they act out their good intentions may not always come out right. Children honour their parents when they believe that parents, even in their imperfect ways, have their children's well-being at heart. In fact, to pretend that one's parents are perfect can instil false guilt in a child because he thinks that the tension between him and his parents is his fault since his parents are supposed to be faultless. Only God the Heavenly Father is the perfect parent. Even the best parents have made mistakes. But God is saying, "I want children to honour the position of parenthood."

Third, honouring parents may someday see a reversal of roles. It is increasingly becoming a reality in our society of aging population. Those who were once parented by fathers and mothers often find themselves parenting their aged parents in their final years of life. The parent that once fed and diapered the child may in the last days of life be fed and diapered by the child. The new baby that did not recognize his parents may someday look at his aged, demented parent

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and not receiving in return a look of recognition. The child who was once parented now becomes his parent's parent.

With these broad perspectives in mind, let's consider ...

III. Some implications for applying the 5th Commandment

First implication: Honouring parents implies obedience. The Greek word for "obey" (*hypakouo*) means to listen or to heed. When a child is of minor age, then obeying parents runs hand-in-hand with honouring parents. That includes listening, heeding, and submitting to their authority. The obedience that children learn at home will serve them well in honouring authorities in other spheres of life.

When they become adults, children listen and heed not so much to submit to parental authority, but to give due consideration to the parents' words, thinking, and feelings.

For example, if you have non-believing parents, they may not think and feel like you concerning Christian commitment. When it comes to (say) baptism, many believing parents will probably be very encouraging in letting their children take this step of commitment. However, non-believing parents may not be so. To let their child be baptized as a Christian is like to let their child be shaved bald of hair and enter monkhood. There is a very uneasy sense of being separated from the world and life of their child. So, if a non-believing parent is not ready for the child to be baptized, I believe God wants the child to honour that parent by giving due consideration to his/her reservation about baptism. If need be, delay the baptism; explain the meaning of baptism; pray for God to prepare the heart. In other words, instead of pushing that parent further away from Christ by defying his/her thinking and feeling, work at drawing that parent closer to Christ by deferring to his/her thinking and feeling; praying and believing that God is still working in the parent's heart.

A lot of times, young people as they grow seem to find it more and more difficult to communicate with their parents. But believe me—parents want to talk with their children. They may be slow to listen and quick to talk, they may not always get your point, they may sound like a broken record, they may not always be gracious with their words, they may not always live up to what they say, they may not seem as wise as before. But this doesn't mean that they do not want to communicate with you. It only means that they are imperfect people who still love their children although in an imperfect manner. So, open up your world to them.

I have a relative whose son was enlisted into National Service about the same time as me. Every weekend, her son would come home and shared with her the things that happened in camp. Of course, he told her all the "horror" stories and exaggerated many of them. One day, she visited my

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mother and related to her the things that her son told her about camp life. My mother felt very nervous after hearing her. So, when I was home one weekend, my mother said to me, “So-and-so came and told me that her son had all these terrible experiences in camp. Do you have them too?” I said, “Yeah—more or less.” My mother said, “Why you never tell me?” I tried to brush her off by saying, “I don’t know you are interested in army life and I also don’t want you to worry. But it’s okay—I can take it.” Even my father added a rare advice, “Be careful. There are many gangsters in camp. Don’t mix with bad company.” It was a real eye-opener for me—to look at the faces of my parents and realize that they were interested in me talking to them about my world and life.

Young people, your parents want to talk with you about your world and life, even if they are imperfect in their approach. So, be open to communicate with them.

Second implication: Honouring parents implies forgiveness. The fact of life is we often hurt those we love the most, intentionally and unintentionally. Families must be built on forgiveness because we do hurt each other. In his/her imperfection, your parent may have hurt you very badly, and you harbour resentment towards him/her. But even if your feelings are justified, you can still choose to forgive. Otherwise, there’s no way to open up to the possibility of better feelings towards that parent.

Forgiveness presupposes remembering. You cannot say you forgive a wrong if you do not remember that wrong. You cannot forgive something if you remember nothing. And sometime later, you cannot say that you have already forgiven a wrong if you have not remembered afresh that wrong at the time when it is mentioned again. So, “forgive and forget” may sound kind-hearted and simple. But really, it is often naive and even emotionally detrimental.

If you have been hurt by a parent, the first person who needs inner healing is not the parent who has wronged you. The first person who needs inner healing is you yourself—the one who has been hurt. You are the first person you need to bring before God. Such a step works at changing you before anyone else. Be honest with God concerning how you feel about the hurt, and seek His inner healing for you. Without such honesty, you can live out the hurt feelings in your future relationships in a harmful way.

I have a cousin with two daughters. Her husband deserted her and their children many years ago. In fact, he fled the country because he was wanted by the law for commercial frauds and the loan sharks for unsettled debts.

My cousin went through a period of emotional collapse. She had to return to work to take care of family needs. But it was so hard that she eventually

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had to send her surviving mother-in-law back to China to be cared for by relatives there.

At first, I thought that the man had a problem with greed—that he was obsessed with getting rich quickly. But as I began to understand his background better, I discovered that he had a deeper problem with forgiveness.

I learned that he was actually an unwanted child—he was abandoned by his biological parents and a kind-hearted couple adopted him as their son. Though they did tell him about this, he affirmed that he had no wish to seek his biological parents but would continue to take care of his adopted parents.

But this was only a disguise of the very deep-seated hurt and hatred in his heart. What he eventually did to his wife, his children, and the aging woman who had adopted him was just his way of getting even in life. If his biological parents could cruelly abandon him, he too could do the same to his own family.

Here we learn the importance of role modelling as parent—how our children practice honour or dishonour can be shaped by the honourable or dishonourable legacy we pass down to them. Indeed, many marriages have been ruined because a spouse has never resolved a relationship with a parent and is taking it out on the husband or wife or children (e.g. husband who has grown up with an abusive father may abuse his wife and children in his own marriage).

There is no need to be afraid to admit to God our inability to forgive. It is true that unforgiveness is often sin, but that is really deliberate unforgiveness, where we have hardened our hearts and vowed never to consider forgiveness for someone. A child of God going to his Heavenly Father for help with something he cannot do for himself will find not an angry, threatening God with a big stick waiting for him, but One who has only a heart full of love, compassion, mercy and a desire to help.

Let me make a qualifying statement at this point. The 5th Commandment does not force children to honour that which is not honourable. E.g. it does not approve or condone parental brutality or abuse.

Third implication: Honouring parents implies affirming the worth of aged parents. For many parents, the older they get the less respect they seem to get. All of their affirming friends start to die off. They are no longer in hot demand for their work skills and experience. Their grown-up children are busy with their own families. They lead lonely lives.

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For those of us with aged parents, do remember that they have a great and desperate need—i.e. to feel and to know that they have made some kind of positive contribution in your life. They need affirmation. If you're going to give them flowers, do it while they're alive, not when they're dead and gone. Flowers at the funeral are for your benefit, not theirs.

Affirming aged parents also means that we let them know they are still worthy of our care. It is worth noting that when Jesus Christ was dying for the sin of the world on the Cross, one of the things that He did not forget was to care for His aging mother. Hanging on the Cross, dying in pain, one of the seven last things He said looking down at John the disciple was, "Take care of my mother." While He's dying for the world, He did not forget to arrange for the care of His aging mother.

Many of us have to care for aged parents in one way or another. How do we then honour our parents as they grow older and decline in health?

My own experience has taught me that it is a big mistake to think that being a good son or daughter is to do all the caregiving and not ask for any help. So, we do well to consider seriously a couple of things as we learn to parent our parents.

- First, learn to be a wise caregiver. It is very draining to do all the caregiving by yourself in the light of an aging parent's increasing needs. We need to learn to be wise manager by sharing the caregiving load among people whom we can trust. This allows each caregiver personal time and space to stay healthy physically and emotionally so that each can continue to do a good job in caring for the parent.

In times of a serious illness, the most loving way to honour a parent may be to recognise our own limits, and take into account what is best for the parent, for other family members, and for our own self. This may imply that the best option for our ailing parent to live with as much dignity as possible is for him or her to stay in the best nursing facility we can afford, and without feeling guilty about letting others better care for our beloved parent.

- Second, learn to create healthy limits with an aged parent. Very often, it is not that the child wants to do everything for the parent. Rather, it is the other way round—the parent wants the child to do everything for him or her. The parent takes advantage of the child's sense of guilt for saying "no" and wants to be too intrusive all the time. In such an instance, we honour our parent best when we learn to set boundaries and limits. These settings protect us from being overwhelmed by our parent. One way to set some healthy limits is to trust the parent to be capable of some self-

direction. In this way, we do not make our parent more dependent on us than he or she should.

- Third, learn to persevere in the Lord as caring for parents can seem like a thankless task.

There was this old lady who was nearly blind and she had three sons who wanted to prove which one was the best son to her.

So Son #1 bought her an 8-room mansion thinking this would surely be the best any of them could offer her.

Son #2 bought her a beautiful Mercedes with a chauffeur included thinking he would surely win her approval.

Son #3 had to do something even better than these so he bought her a parrot that had been trained to memorize Bible verses word-perfect.

Well, the old lady went to the first son and said, "Son, the house is just gorgeous but it's really much too big for me. I only live in one room, and it's much too large for me to take care of. I really don't need the house, but thank you anyway."

Then she confronted her second son, "Son, the car is beautiful, it has everything you could ever want in it, but I don't drive and I really don't like that driver, so please return the car."

Next, she went to the third son and said, "Son, I just want to thank you for the most thoughtful gift. That chicken was delicious!"

One of the greatest challenges and frustrations of caring for aging parents is that you never seem to be appreciated or appreciated the right way even after trying your best. Try as best as we can, but we may not seem to get the right kind of appreciation from our aging parent. But persevere we must with the Lord's help.

Fourth implication: Honouring parents implies remembering them, even when they are gone. We need to remain grateful to them for the life they began for us; always mindful of the roots from which we have sprung. For families with Christian roots, this is our way of passing down family stories of ancestral faith and faithfulness to following generations.

My father-in-law died in the Lord. His eldest son gave him a Christian funeral as a mark of last respect even though he himself was not a

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believer. One time when Qing Ming came, the family wanted to visit the columbarium to pay their respect. They asked Iris and me to be there as well. When we were there, I told them that though we would not worship the dead, we would remember and respect the dead in our own Christian way. So Iris and I began with a moment of silence, laid down some fresh flowers, and then helped to clean up the niche. To my pleasant surprise, I was asked by the family to end our time there with prayer.

While we did not participate in all things with the family, our presence there had reassured them that we would remember and respect the dead in our own Christian way even though we do not worship or deify them. I believe when we honour our departed parents this way, we honour God before others as well.

Conclusion

After my mother had a stroke in 2004, she became diminished in mobility and disoriented with memory loss. It was very difficult and draining for us to take care of her and carry on with our regular work at the same time. Our family then decided to settle her into a nursing home for a time, and bring her back home when her condition improved.

After about a year, my mother's condition improved. But we became so comfortable with her staying in the nursing home that I was slow to make arrangement to bring her back home.

One day, my younger daughter said to me, "Daddy, you say that you will bring mama home when she is better. Now that she is better, why are you still keeping her in the nursing home?"

Her words were like God's rebuke thundering into my ears that day. I felt so stricken in my conscience that I had my mother back home not long after that.

As I end my sermon, I have these closing words to all parents among us—"Let's show our children how to honour us by the way we honour our own parents. Remember, our children are watching us!"

May the Lord help us as children to honour our parents, and as parents to show ourselves worthy of our children's honour.