

When we lived in the United States from 1990-2000, prayer was being banned from the government schools. Many Christian parents were very upset by this. A group of 300 evangelical leaders went to Washington in protest to meet with the Senate chaplain, Richard Halverson, to try to stop the removal of prayer from the schools. Dr. Halverson said to the crowd: *I have a question for you, 'How many of you have prayed with your children this month outside of church?'* Nobody raised his hand! This is a sad commentary on the state of family religion today.

The 5th commandment is: **Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.** (Exodus 20:12) This is a two-sided commandment. On the one side, children are called to honor their parents *in the Lord*. This is what a household among God's covenant people looks like. On the other side, fathers and mothers are called to rule their children *in the Lord*. This too is what a household among God's covenant people looks like.

The meaning of this command

Children, obey your parents in the Lord...And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

With this command God establishes the family setting as the proper context for passing on the Christian faith to the next generation. We might read it this way: *children obey your parents in the Lord as they teach you the way of the Lord*. Our culture arrogantly wants to claim the right to define family in any way we choose – 2 mothers, 2 fathers, unmarried parents, etc. In fact, all government forms in the province of Ontario recently removed the categories of 'father' and 'mother' – just to make sure that we aren't assuming a set definition for family! But God in this commandment defines the complete family setting – Father, Mother, and children. Yes, there are times in His providence when father or mother are taken away from us, or when there can be no children. God is still powerfully at work in such a family that trusts in Him. But that doesn't abolish the institution of family as God has ordained it.

In that family context, the Lord places a structure of real authority. **Children, obey your parents...honour your father and mother. Fathers...bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.** The catechism points that out: God's will for us is that *I honor, love and be loyal to my father and mother and all those in authority over me...for through them God chooses to rule us*. God wants us to recognize the family context and the authority structure in that context so that the next generation of His children can know the Lord and His ways. The 5th commandment is fundamental to the Christian faith.

Some teach that the old covenant is a covenant-in-the-flesh made with households that run through family lines, but the new covenant is a *spiritual* covenant that is more personal and individual. This contrast between old and new is wrong! The old and the new covenant are very much the same in the way God uses the parents in His covenant to reach the children of His covenant. For this reason households are baptized in the new covenant just as households were circumcised in the old covenant. And for this reason the apostle Paul talks to the children in Ephesians 6:1-3 as members of the church! God intends the parents to pass on the faith to their children and the children to learn the faith from their parents. (All this happens inside the bigger context of the church which instructs both parents and children. That's why God sent Paul to instruct both parents and children in the church at Ephesus.)

I'm sure this teaching is not new to you, but it is important to be reminded of the things we already know. That's how the Holy Spirit stirs us up to turn from sin and walk in His ways.

What does this command mean? Two words are used: **Children obey your parents; honour your father and mother.** Notice that even though the husband is the loving head of his wife, and his wife is to submit to her husband with respect (see Ephesians 5:22-33), children are to honour and obey both parents *equally*, without distinction. We may not say or even think: *Oh, I have to give my dad more respect than my mom because he's the head of the home*. No way! And it is important that dads stand behind their wives and demand that their children honor their mothers! Otherwise, how will they learn the faith from their mothers?

Children, obey your parents. This is not easy because rebellion lives in our hearts from birth, nor is it always simple because sometimes there are circumstances that complicate matters. If we grew up in families where the parent-child relationship was healthy and happy this made obedience a fairly simple matter – not always easy, but simple. You have good memories of home. But if you are from a home where the relationship was very unhealthy, and parents were very harsh and unfair, that made obedience much more complicated. And it still breaks your heart if you let yourself think about it. As God's people we need to appreciate the difficulties many go through, and support those who seek to honor parents who are harsh and unkind.

As parents let us be careful to deal firmly, fairly, kindly, and gently with our children, not selfishly. Let us use our authority in a Gospel manner, as Christ's representatives. This is what it means to bring them up *in the Lord*. We must use our authority to serve, not to exploit. We must use our authority not to keep our children out of our way, but to direct them in the Lord's way.

Yet the commandment is spiritual, good, and stands firm: **Children, obey your parents.** Without fighting and arguing, listen to them. When it seems unfair to you, listen to them. When it goes against what you want listen to them. Show respect by being patient with their failings. Sometimes as we become teenagers our parents' failings really begin to aggravate us and we begin to despise them for their weaknesses. Guard yourself against this, dear sons and daughters! Be loyal to them even when you're with your friends and mom and dad can't see you or hear you. If you put them down and despise them when they're out of earshot, it will affect your relationship with them. Most of all, it will affect your relationship with the Lord for your sins against your parents are really committed against Jesus who is caring for you through them.

As you grow up and leave home, the command to obey them decreases, but the command to honour them continues. The 5th commandment continues until our parents die and even after they die! People of God, our parents spent lots of time and energy on us when we're young, but as they grow old, this goes into reverse: we are called to spend lots of time and energy on them just because they are our parents! In our culture so many abandon their parents because they're too busy for them, or because they're afraid it will hurt their careers and bank accounts, or because they don't have the patience. This is ungodly. We must take care of them when they're older! This becomes more of an issue as parents live longer than they used to.

The reason for this command

Paul gives 3 reasons here for children to obey and honour their parents. First, it is right. It is fitting. It is natural. It is the way God made the family to function. It is unnatural and unfitting for children not to be required to obey their parents. That would destroy the family fabric, and if the family fabric is destroyed, society itself cannot stand. It will fall apart. The obedience of children to parents is the seedbed for obedience to church and state. If obedience to authority is not learned at home, it will not be learned anywhere.

What we have going on in liberal western societies today is unnatural. Many atheists believe that parents teaching the children the Christian faith and its moral values is a form of child abuse. Children should be left alone to determine their own values. In some countries it is considered a violation of human rights for parents to punish their children, and corporal punishment is illegal. This is not right; it is unnatural. It defies the Creator's design for human life and relationships and can only produce chaos and misery.

Sometimes parents themselves are anti-authority in their outlook and encourage their children to despise the government and the police and the church and other authority figures in their lives. Beloved, let us encourage humble submission in our children's lives. It's the training ground for loving God.

A 2nd reason for obedience is, very simply, God has commanded it in His Law. It is for all people, but in a special way for His people! Jesus writes through Paul, His messenger: **Honor your father and mother – which is the first commandment with promise.** Before you jump to word promise, pay attention to the word commandment! This command was given at Mt. Sinai and repeated in the New Testament, and in a special manner given to the church! This is where loyalty to parents and all those in authority ought to reign, and shine before the world as a witness to all: God is our Lord and King! Of course there are limits. We must obey God rather than man, when anyone puts us in a spot of making a choice between obeying God or obeying man. We must respectfully obey God and humbly suffer the consequences. But of all people, the ones who know their God must lead the way in showing obedience to those whom God has placed in authority.

There's one more reason, and it's actually the 1st and most important one: it's the Lord Jesus. **Children, obey your parents in the Lord.** That's a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. **Obey your parents in the Lord.** One translation has: **Children, you belong to the Lord, so obey your parents!** (CEV) As your parents train and admonish you in the Lord's ways, (6.4), so you must obey and follow their direction and discipline in the Lord's ways! This command is not a burden. It is good news – the Lord Jesus, the Saviour, is reaching out His hands to the young children of the covenant through their parents and saying: *Follow Me!*

You will see this very clearly in the context of Ephesians 6:1-4. Paul speaks of three relationships among God's people: husband and wife, parents and children, masters and slaves (or employers and employees). In each relationship he emphasizes that the foundational reason for behaving as we do in our marriages, families and workplace is that we are Christ's people and we have been saved to live for Him, to honor Him, and to show His glory. Parents, it's about Jesus, not about you! Children, it's about Jesus, not

you! We don't obey simply because we're told to, or to avoid punishment, but for Jesus' sake! Remember that God gave your parents to you not to do whatever you want, or whatever they want, but to do whatever he wants. Parents, we don't command our children just to avoid being embarrassed by our children's bad behaviour, or so we can be proud of them and show others just what good parents we are. We do it for Jesus' sake. They're His children, not ours, ultimately.

3) The promise of this command

God attaches a reward to this commandment: **that it may go well with you and you may enjoy long life on the earth.** We must be careful not to read this promise in the wrong way. This doesn't mean that every good child will live to at least 90 years old, but every bad child will not make it past 30 years. Not every child of God lives to be old. God takes some at a very young age or at middle-age. Adam's son Abel, the evangelist Stephen, the apostle James – these and many other righteous people have been snatched away right in the middle of life.

In the Old Testament the promise was attached to **'the land' – 'so that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.'** The meaning of this is that if the children did not obey their parents instruction in the Lord's ways, Israel would become ungodly and they wouldn't be able to stay there in the land of Canaan. This is exactly what happened. They had to leave the land and live as exiles in foreign countries for many years. It was also true at an individual level: if a son or daughter cursed his father or mother he had to be put to death. (see Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

In the New Testament, the word **'land'** is changed to **'earth': "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the earth."** The people of God are no longer tied to the land of Israel in the Middle East; they are spread over the whole earth. In fact, one day the earth will belong to Christians alone. Jesus said: **The meek shall inherit the earth.** (Matthew 5:5) When Jesus returns at the end of the age, He will destroy all wickedness and make this world a new heaven and new earth, and all the saints shall live here forever. But if you do not heed your parents' instruction in the Lord, then you will not remain on this earth. You will be cast into everlasting destruction.

What does it really mean? It means your salvation and well-being depend on you honoring your parents. No, obeying mom and dad can't save you. Only Jesus can. But this is a promise to God's people who have God's Word, who know Jesus and believe in Him. In all their teaching and rules and discipline their aim is to bring Jesus to you and you to Jesus. And through them Jesus is stretching out His hands to you. If you reject their instruction, your life will be cut short. You will perish. You will not inherit the earth; you will reap destruction.

Listen to the evangelical father speaking to his son in Proverbs:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commands, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. (Proverbs 3:1-2)

Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown." Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. (; 4:5-10)

For here really is the soul of the 5th commandment – your heavenly father has given you your earthly father and mother so that through them you will find your way to the heavenly Father and spend eternity with Him, in His household and it is their special task and privilege to bring God and godliness to you and you to God and godliness. Through them the Lord is calling you to come to Him in trust, in worship, in love and obedience – to live the truly good life.

Conclusion

Many children think that if they buy a gift for their parents and give them royal treatment on Mother's Day and Father's day, then they are honoring their parents. Others think that if they just follow their parents' orders, then they are being good children. But this is not really what God has in mind in the 5th commandment. In this commandment God's plan is that we embrace our parents' God as our God, in true and living faith. We truly honor them when we accept their instruction *in the Lord* and imitate their *faith*. That's what truly delights your father and mother! Above all, it delights your Father in heaven! And then it shall go well with you – *forever!*