



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Remember the Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11

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Honour Your Father and Your Mother

Exodus 20:12

This morning, as we continue with our study of the Decalogue, we move into what's often called the "Second Table" of the law. Moses, we're told, came down from Mount Sinai with two tablets and there's some debate about those two tablets. In more recent times some have argued that they were identical. When a covenant was made in the Ancient Near East two copies would be made, one for each party. So one copy of the Decalogue was the Lord's and was put in the ark of the covenant and the other was for Israel, maybe displayed somewhere for all to see. But traditionally Christians have depicted the ten commandments divided between the two tablets, with the first four or "First Table" of the law on one and the "Second Table" on the other. It used to be common in Anglican churches for the Decalogue to be posted in the chancel for everyone to see on large plaques, carved in stone or bronze or painted on wood, along with the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. You usually see the Decalogue displayed on two tablets like this, the first table on one and the second on the other. The first table deals with our relation to God. The second table deals with our relation to our fellow human beings. The second flows from the first. Relating properly to other people flows naturally from relating properly to God. As St. John writes in his first epistle, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John

4:20). Right relation to others flows from right relation to God. This fifth word or fifth commandment transitions us from the first to the second table. Look at Exodus 20:12. Here's what the Lord says to his people Israel:

**Honor your father and your mother,
that your days may be long in the
land that the LORD your God is
giving you.**

What did this mean to the Israelites? How would they have understood this? As I've said before: We swim in a different cultural river than they did. When we hear these words, I think the first thing we're likely to think of is children obeying their parents. Maybe that's all we think of. And I think this has a lot to do with how and when we teach our kids about the Decalogue. When it comes to young children, this is where the focus ought to be—obeying parents—but I think that in many cases, the only time we learn about the Decalogue is when we're kids or when we're in catechism class. By the time we're adults, no one talks much about this subject anymore and we may never stop to think about what this commandment means for us as adults. We ought to, because the main audience when God spoke these words was made up of *adults*. So what does it mean to "honour" our parents? The Hebrew word is *kabbed* and it has the sense of something being weighty in the sense of importance. From there it took on the sense of honour or glory. To "honour" something or someone is to exalt it. It's a word used in worship. In fact, it's a term usually related to God, which gives us a sense of how important this idea of honouring parents is. So obeying our parents is part of the idea of honouring them, but it's much bigger than that. It's about valuing parents, acknowledging and respecting their dignity, and treating them with honour—regardless of their shortcomings and regardless of the cost to us.

Our other problem is that we're prone to approaching this subject from the individualistic mindset that we have as modern Westerners and when we do that we ignore the communal emphasis that ancient peoples had and the importance of the covenant when it came specifically to Israel.

Israel was in covenant with the Lord. He had made her his people and was bringing her to his land to live in his presence. As a people, Israel was to be a witness to the world of what it looked like to live in the Lord's presence. Part of that was to show the goodness of his rule over creation. For people in that time and place and culture, goodness was about order. For us goodness is about what makes us happy. We're very focused on ourselves. They weren't. They thought in terms of the community and goodness meant preserving order in the community.

The basic unit of the society or of the community is the family and this commandment is aimed at preserving it. For them, the well-being of the community was more important than any one individual's happiness. In contrast, I've noticed that whenever we talk about honouring or obeying our parents, there's almost always someone who chimes in with an objection or a caveat: "What if your parent tells you to do something that's wrong?" Or "What if your dad's a jerk?" We always seem to be looking for the way out or for the exception. No so the people to whom this was written. First, along with this went the assumption that parents were obligated to raise children who would keep and value the covenant. But, second, with order and the integrity of the community's and family's identity at stake, hurt feelings would have taken a backseat. Dad might be a jerk, but it was still in the interest of everyone—including the kids—to honour him and Mother. Dad might have had a bad temper or might be lacking in some other thing we value in our fathers, but he honoured his own parents, he honoured the family and its traditions,

he provided for the family and took care of the family lands, he was wise in the ways of the world or of business or of agriculture, and he instilled a value for tradition, for the Lord, and for the covenant in his children. All of these things preserved order and that was good. If nothing else, the father's status as father was deserving of honour. Even if he was a poor father, he was still the head of the family under God and the one who gave life and that was worthy of honour itself. Think of the way we give honour to a judge or a prime minister or a president even if we don't like their ideas, their politics, or their performance. The office itself commands respect.

In contrast, our culture elevates youth. We place little value on age and even less on the wisdom that comes with age. Tradition is bad, whether we're talking about pop culture, philosophy, or politics. Everything wrong in the world is blamed on the previous generation, its mistakes, and its antiquated values. It seems that we value our elders so long as they dote on us, but if they don't or when they're no longer able—when they become a “burden”—we too often abandon them to nursing homes and then squabble over the inheritance when they're gone. Of course, there are also older folks who seem to have abandoned their children, summed up in that bumper sticker: “We're spending our kids' inheritance”.

It happens in the Church as well. Church over the last forty to fifty years has absorbed this obsession with youth. Churches are driven by pop-culture fads. The music is the music of the young. The wisdom of past generations is scoffed at as old-fashioned and irrelevant. Older people who complain about it are told to shut up: the future is with the youth. We even split up our churches by ages. One of the latest trends is having a church within a church aimed just at the youth. It's hip and exciting and

young and you don't have mix with your boring parents or grandparents. This exactly the *opposite* of what the Church is by its very nature. Churches looking for a new pastor used to look for someone with experience, with education, with a track-record of wise pastoral leadership. Now it's about finding a young rockstar, someone hip, someone who will help us do big and loud and new, because new is where is where it's at. And this philosophy perpetuates itself. And it brings disorder. It undermines the foundation of both society and the Church. With no roots, people are—as St. Paul wrote—“carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes”. And we become poor witnesses of the Lord Jesus and of his kingdom.

But this kind of attitude was not part of the cultural matrix of the Israelites—or of the Ancient Near East in general. The ancient Israelites took this idea of honouring parents as seriously as we take it lightly. Consider the penalty for dishonouring one's parents. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 is just one of several similar passages in the *torah*.

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

They weren't fooling around with this. Remember the second part of the commandment: Honour your father

and your mother, *that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you*. This promise extends to the whole of the Decalogue and the *torah* as well, but it's placed here in the middle as a reminder. God is bringing these people to *his* land. He is holy, his land is holy, and if they want to continue to live there, they too must be holy. The penalty for not being holy is—will be—exile from the land, and so the penalty for disobedience at the individual level is severe. Again, this affects the whole community.

This might help you understand the scandal of Jesus' parable about the prodigal son. This young man demanded his inheritance before his father was even dead, he abandoned his family, and he spent the money in a far country on parties and prostitutes. His father would have been justified in dragging him to the city gate to be stoned to death—that's what the law said to do to a young, disrespectful ingrate like this boy—but instead the father was waiting for his return and embraced and honoured him. The boy was deserving of death, but his loving father forgave him and welcomed him home instead.

Of course, the flip side of this is that the covenant also expected parents to be raising faithful covenant children. This is what Moses tells the people in Deuteronomy 6:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the

doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Parents are due honour by virtue of their being the ones who gave life to their children, but honour is also something that has to be cultivated. God's covenant people were expected to raise godly covenant children: to teach his law to their children, teaching them when they were in the house, when they were out on the way, when they put them to bed, and when they got them up in the morning. Consider Proverbs 22:15:

**Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.**

Covenant parents were expected to drive that folly far, far away from their children. And for that parents are due a great measure of honour. Consider also Proverbs 1:8-9:

**Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
and forsake not your mother's teaching,
for they are a graceful garland for your head
and pendants for your neck.**

You see, there was nothing more important than the Lord's covenant with his people and parents were to be the first mediators of that covenant to their children. It wasn't to be left to Sunday School teachers—as wonderful as they may be—or to Veggie Tales videos. Fathers and mothers were to take charge of instilling covenant loyalty and love for God in their children. That was their first and greatest responsibility. And, Brothers and Sisters, there is no one in this world worthy of more honour than the father and mother who are committed to and do their best to raise godly children.

Now, what does this mean for us? Again, and as we're reminded by the

second half of the verse, this commandment was part of Israel's covenant with the Lord. Israel was called to model the Lord's goodness in a well-ordered society and the family was at the centre of that. As much as culture changes and there are many ways in which they would have shown honour to parents that are no longer part of our cultural matrix, this value for parents and family remains essentially in place in the New Covenant. We are God's new creation and the Church is called to model that new creation, its order and its values to the watching world so that it, too, can know God's goodness.

We don't have to look very far around us to realise that the world needs this witness. Even back in the First Century, Paul listed disobedience to parents as one of the hallmarks of fallen human society's rejection of God (Romans 1:30, 2 Timothy 3:2). And God's own people aren't immune to this failing. In Matthew 15, Jesus confronted some of the Pharisees. They actually had the gall to dishonour their parents and justify it by claiming they were serving the Lord. These people would devote their money and resources to God and then, when their elderly parents came to them in need, they'd say, "Oh, sorry! Can't help you. I've committed my resources to the Lord." Jesus had strong words of condemnation for these people and stressed God's requirement that we honour our parents.

I don't think it's possible to cover all the specifics of how we're called to do this in a single sermon. You don't want to be here that long. The fact is, I think a lot of you, being older and more experienced than me, could probably come up with more specifics and examples than I can. But I think there are some basic principles that start with caring for our elderly parents. Brothers and Sisters, we Christians should be counter-cultural in this area of life. Our society sees

less and less value in the elderly. In Canada euthanasia is now legal and one of the fears many have expressed is the pressure children will put on parents to off themselves rather than be a burden or consume the inheritance. Even with euthanasia aside, our society too often dumps the care of parents on others. We'd often rather see Mom and Dad eking out a lonely and meagre existence on Canada Pension or Social Security than invite them to live with us as previous generations did. We dump responsibility on the government rather than take it ourselves. I realise this isn't simple. It was our parents and grandparents who supported these government programmes in the first place. They bear some of the responsibility for this breakdown in our society. But Scripture doesn't call us to honour our perfect parents who never made any mistakes. It calls us to honour our parents despite their imperfections. As Christians, we ought to be the first to recognise our own failures rather than rejecting others for theirs.

So take care of your parents to the best of your ability. Keep them a part of your family. Show them honour. Respect their dignity. They gave you life. For many of us, they're the ones who brought us to the font as children and raised us to know God's goodness and to love him. They deserve our honour despite their imperfections.

Second, the flip side of this is that parents need to take their God-given role seriously. It should go without saying that abusing our children is to abuse the role God has given us as parents. But I think the bigger problem today is that parents avoid the role they've been given. Rather than being parents to our children, we try to be their friends. Parents are afraid their children won't like them and so they abandon their God-given duty to discipline their children. This backfires in a host of ways, most commonly in that it fails to instil in

our children a respect for authority and especially God's own authority. And take responsibility for raising godly children yourself. Sunday School teachers are great, but they aren't a substitute for the role God has given you. They have your kids for less than an hour a week. You have them all the time. Teach them, as Moses said, in the house, on the way, when they got to bed and when they wake up in the morning. Disciplining and training aren't easy, but they are our God-given duty as parents. Scripture is clear on this over and over and over and we are disobedient to God if we fail to take it seriously.

Finally, what about the exceptions? We read, for example, St. Paul's teaching in Ephesians: Children, obey your parents. And someone always says, "Yeah, but what if my parents want me to do something that's wrong?" We can be shamefully quick to run to the exceptions, but the fact is that there sometime will be exceptions. There are parents who are sinful. There are parents who are abusive. There are parents who neglect their children. How do we respond to those parents? Brothers and Sisters, the first thing I think that needs to be said is this: Don't respond in anger or without due deliberation. The failure of a parent to uphold the Lord's commands and expectations on their part doesn't give a child an automatic pass when it comes to honouring them. The Gospel paradigm simply doesn't let us escape it. If Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he also calls us to love our parents even in their failures. In all things we're called to seek for reconciliation to the best of our abilities. The cross reminds us of this. God didn't love us when we were righteous. He loved us when we were sinners and gave his Son in order to reconcile us to himself. That needs to be the lens through which we look at every relationship in life. Yes, Jesus calls us to make him our priority:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37-39)

But, Friends, if we love Jesus above all else, it means we've been shaped by his cross. It means we've been filled with God's own Spirit and the law is no longer written on tablet of stone. If we are in Christ, the law of the Spirit is written on our hearts. The law of the Spirit, the love of God written on our hearts ought to shape us as parents, giving us a desire to raise godly children, but that love of God written on our hearts and the experience of his grace and mercy in our own sinful and imperfect lives ought to shape our relationship with everyone—and first and foremost our parents. When we honour the one who has given them to us. When we honour them we honour the Creator who has blessed us with our families. When we honour them despite their failures we model for the world the grace of the God who loves us despite our own failures.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for our parents. Teach us to honour them and, particularly, to honour them in your name. Teach us to value them as the people who gave us life, the people who cared for us and raised us, and the people who brought us to you and taught us the gospel. If we have been remiss in our duties to our parents, shine your bright light on our failures and move our hearts to repentance. May your goodness and the goodness of your kingdom be on display in our families. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.