

The Big Ten: Honor and Promise
By Jason Huff
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Ephesians 6:1-3; Mark 7:1-13; Exodus 20:1-17

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Exodus 20:1-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along in your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God. "And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.""

"I didn't sign up for this." That phrase is defined in the Urban Dictionary as "a universal saying for not getting what one wants, usually from cowardice." It's a cliché in action movies when things start blowing up and a hero says, "I didn't sign up for this!" When the really bad guy tells the only sorta bad guys his evil schemes, what do they say? "I didn't sign up for this!"

We hear it in everyday life in a hundred different variations, most often in our families. We might not say it, but we think it, when children run amuck and the refrigerator stops refrigerating and the car repair bill is more than you make in a month. Or it could be on the other side of family, when we're dealing with aging parents whose lives throw a wrench in our plans, when we wind up parenting our parents. Our first thought is, "I didn't sign up for this!"

We've been working through the Ten Words: the Commandments God gave to us to bring us into relationship with Himself and with others. As it turns out, we might not have signed up for the whole family thing, but God signed up His people to have deep connections to family. Today we're looking at the Fifth Commandment, what it means, and how the gospel of Jesus Christ makes this impossible word more possible.

The Fifth Commandment is simple: “Honor your father and your mother.” This is the first one that’s positive, that’s something to do. It’s in a special position in the list, too: it’s the turning point between the first four commands, which are about our relationship with God, and the others, which govern our relationships with others. The family is God's ordained means for us to know Him, to see His love in action, and to get our initial training in His ways. As our Heavenly Father, He gave us earthly fathers and mothers to point us to Him. Parents are in the mediating position in the Ten Commandments between God and others. They deserve our honor.

What does it mean to honor our parents? The word in Hebrew for honor is *kabed*, which also means weight or burden. It goes far beyond treating parents with respect. It literally means to place weight on their words and to follow their instruction. It means to be yoked with them, to be burdened with them and alongside them. After our relationship with God, our parents are to carry more weight with us than anyone else.

This command also comes with a promise - “that you may live long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” In Deuteronomy, the promise expands that “it may go well with you.” What is this all about? The promise was given to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. Honor your parents, God says, and not only will you have long lives to enjoy this great new place, your time there will be blessed! It doesn't really matter if you live a long time someplace that's miserable. But God is saying, “It will go well!”

God built this promise into the foundation of all human societies. Strong, ethical parents who produce strong, ethical children make for a society that flourishes. This isn't something sociologists have just discovered; it's been true from the beginning. This command reflects a natural law God makes available to everyone. That's why many societies have taught variations on this theme. Even when societies are in freefall, as ours appears to be, when children are faithful to God and honor their parents, they have a much greater potential to succeed.

The Old Testament takes this command very seriously. Anyone who cursed his mother or father could be put to death. In Deuteronomy, a glutton and drunkard who stubbornly refused his parents despite repeated pleas could be stoned. That sounds really harsh, doesn't it? But this was a matter of life and death. A son who ate and drank to excess, who rebelled, who refused to help could literally wind up killing his family. There was too much for a family to do in an agricultural society for a son or daughter to refuse to help. Those laws don't bind us anymore, and we're thankful, but it shows how serious and necessary it was for families to work together.

But loopholes were found around the law. Jesus talks about how the scribes and Pharisees dishonored their parents with a clever scheme. The *corban* was the temple treasury. One was required to pay certain amounts to the treasury at various festivals at the temple in Jerusalem. The rabbis came up with an ingenious way to keep their money from others. They would say that “the help you would have received from me is dedicated to God” – *corban*. They could say that to their neighbors and even to their parents. How could they argue with a gift devoted to God? But Jesus condemned this as dishonoring God *and* their parents. Jesus was saying, in effect, “Don't try to get around your obligation to your parents by dressing it your disobedience as a gift to God!” Jesus emphasizes that our call to honor our parents doesn't end, and it isn't put aside for our own desires.

So how does following this look today? I believe it is written to all of us, in every era, and it puts different requirements and responsibilities on us at different ages. There are two concepts embodied in this command: showing honor to your parents and being worthy of honor.

First is showing honor to your parents. Every stage of life requires this. When we are young, it means listening to our parents. We pay attention to what they have to say. We obey our parents; we follow their rules and instructions. As we grow into our teens and twenties, we give weight to what they say, not only when we disagree with them, but *especially* when we disagree with them. In God's sovereignty, in His guiding hand over all things, He has given us this mother and this father. As much as we like them or love them or not, we take them seriously.

As we get older, showing honor to our parents takes different forms. It means being available for them. That doesn't mean you have to be best friends or live in the same state or do everything together. It does mean that you take their needs into serious consideration. You make time in your schedule for them. You spend time listening to them, even if it's the same story you heard a thousand times when you were a kid.

And as we get older still, it means we make sure they are provided for. Our parents have different needs. Some are going to try and live out every last day in the house they've been in for fifty years. Other are happy in a retirement community with other older adults. Some may need to live with us. We honor them by providing the care they need as we are genuinely able.

Even after our parents are gone, we still honor them. We remember that what we do reflects on our family. My dad died twenty years ago this month, and I still catch myself thinking from time to time, "What would Dad think about this? What would he do? What would he think about me doing this?" That's a good thing.

There's one caveat to this in Ephesians 6:1. The apostle Paul repeats the command, and he says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Our allegiance is always first to God. We obey in the Lord, which means we honor parents as we go about honoring God. When our parents disobey the Lord and tell us to do the same, that's when we must disobey. Our heavenly Father trumps our earthly parents in that regard.

But this is not a copout, even with ungodly parents. We aren't off the hook if our parents are not Christians. We follow the command except when our parents put us in conflict with following God. We obey unbelieving parents – or parents who are not always right or smart or kind or thoughtful – because we have the opportunity to show them that belief in Christ does make a difference in our lives, that we would obey them even when we are opposed to them.

That leads us into the flip side of this command. Just as we want to be honored as parents, so too should we act in ways worthy of honor. The responsibility of being parents is a huge task, one entrusted to us by God. It is far bigger than any of us can accomplish. We must turn to Him at every stage along the way to become mothers and fathers worthy of respect.

When our children are young, Ephesians 6:4 tells dads, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” It’s our job, parents, to teach our kids what it means to be Jesus followers. You can bring them to church; you can bring them to youth group; we’ll teach them more of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. But it starts at home; it starts with us. We must live it out in front of them. We’ve got to be seen praying, reading the Bible, showing we believe it and practice it. We’ve got to train them what it means to be a Christian. I can help you with that. But if we are to train our children to honor us, we must be honorable and instruct them in the ways that God teaches.

As our kids grow up, for those of us whose children are grown and maybe out of the house, we still need to be persons worthy of honor. Our children still look up to us. They want to know that they are loved well beyond the point that you see them every day. They want to know that we are behind them, not controlling their actions but ready with sound advice and a hug. The world criticizes them for being believers, for going against the grain. Moms get attacked if they stay at home with the kids or if they decide to work. Dads are ridiculed as dumb. We still need your support, older parents. You are still important to us. Continue to show the way to us and to your grandchildren. Your job is not done just because we’re out of your house.

And as we reach that stage when we are no longer self-sufficient, where we need help, when things start to fail us, we have the opportunity to model Christ to the end. Instead of complaining about our lot, we continue to show faithful love to our family and friends. We stay worthy of honor by holding fast to Christ and showing grace to our children as they care for us.

I’ll be honest with you – this is where the gospel of Jesus Christ has to enter the picture. The commandment is right and true and good. And we cannot possibly fulfill it in all its forms. We need Jesus. We need Jesus to forgive us where we’ve failed, to lift us when we fall, and to build within us the power of forgiveness. Without Him, we cannot live this commandment out.

The good news comes from recognizing the fullness of the bad news. We make a mess of family. As children, we whine and complain when our parents make us do what we don’t want to do. As we get into our teens, we rebel...sometimes outright, but often by holding them in contempt, not wanting to be seen with them because they’re uncool. We hit college and we’re taught to disrespect our parents and what they believe, so it’s easy to jump on the bandwagon.

We eventually become parents and realize that this is crazy hard. We all mess up, whether we’re fantastic parents or we have no idea what to do with our kids. We make mistakes; we say and do things we regret, and we pray we don’t scar them too badly. Our kids get older and we begin to want our lives back; we selfishly think, “why can’t be out of the house?” And when we finally do need their attention again, we want to matter to them, not to send us off to a facility somewhere but really care about us. In our families, we see our deepest brokenness. A dozen years in counseling can’t fix all the problems we have and cause in many of our families.

That is why we so desperately need the good news, which is offered to us all: the love of God expressed to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. We need to know that despite our failings, despite injuring those closest to us, despite disrespecting those who God gave us to be our parents despite all of that, Jesus wants to mend us. He wants to heal us.

In His death on the cross, He takes every sin we have committed upon Himself; in doing so, He reconciles us, those who believe, to the Father. He saves us from the penalty of that sin and rescues us from the guilt and shame of those sins.

Not only does He provide salvation, He provides healing. He even delivers us from the power of sins committed against us in our families. He gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can be faithful children, faithful parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. The Spirit leads us to acts of love, obedience, and kindness towards our families. Because we are forgiven by Jesus, we see an example of forgiveness we can extend to others in our families – and the power of the Holy Spirit makes it possible to forgive those deep wounds. I encourage you to give yourself over to Christ today and let Him forgive you, save you, and restore you.

God didn't define every way we had to show honor to our parents, and that shows His wisdom. Honoring our parents looks different in each family. Some people had great and loving parents. Honoring them comes easily. Some of you say, "Yeah, but you never met my parents." It's harder to honor parents who aren't like us, who fuss and pick and criticize us. When we're disconnected from them, when they don't like us or vice versa, it's difficult. Honor may look different. It may mean the hard work of conversations when it's inconvenient or hearing about problems that they don't actually want fixed because it gives them something to complain about. It may mean being obedient when we would rather do anything else.

But there's another reason the law is vague, because sometimes honoring a parent is the hardest thing we can do. Because some parents are dishonorable. These are not parents that were grouchy or flighty or irreligious. These are parents who were criminal. Through abuse or not doing anything to stop abuse, they dishonored God and themselves. Those who were supposed to protect you wound up being the ones you needed to be protected from. Even in a small congregation, some of you deal with that. How do you show honor to a parent whose actions were an offense against you and the Father who wanted you to be loved and cherished?

I have a few thoughts on it, not the last word by far but just a start. Know that it's not your fault. Know that no one does something to deserve abuse. If you're still in the situation, get out. If you're older and you're getting pulled back into an abusive situation by an older parent, you are not obligated to take them into your home or your family. Whether they realize it or not, the very best way you can honor them is not to allow them the opportunity to heap up more sins against you or your children or their children.

Then as the Spirit leads, forgive them. Pray for them. Don't condemn them to hell because of the awful things they have done but pray that He might bring them to a place of true repentance and contrition for what they've done. And remember above all that you have a true Father who created you to experience His love and grace. Whereas your earthly parents are bound to fail, and some of them have failed us in crushing ways, your Heavenly Father is there to bind your wounds and heal your hurts and give you someone that you can truly be proud to say is your Father, whom you'll always want to honor.

As much as we recognize that it's hard to follow the first four commandments to stay close to God, the fifth one tugs at our hearts in so many directions. Family brings out the best and worst in us. We see all too well our failings in our families. But God created the family. He created it to be a bulwark, the first place we would hear about Him and learn about Him, where we would see His love modeled.

Let us leave today comforted that His grace is big enough to cover the faults of the past, both the faults we've committed and the faults committed against us. Let us leave today challenged to make our families a place where God is honored and celebrated. Let us leave today convicted to become persons of honor so that not only our own families but other families would look to us and say, "I see Jesus reflected in them." Let us do these in anticipation of the glorious promises of God, that as we honor our parents, it will go well with us.