



# The Ten Commandments

## (22) The Fifth Commandment

### (1) The Basic Thrust of the Command

Exodus 20:12

Matthew 15:1-9

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This morning we will begin our study of the Fifth Commandment which is, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” According to the Reformed confessions, the Fifth Commandment has to do with honoring all forms of God-given authority. The Ten Commandments give the basic principles, but rest of the Bible teaches the implications and applications of those principles so the Fifth Commandment does not only cover honoring our parents, but also honoring authority wherever God has instituted it and so we will have to cover authority in the home and in the church and in the state to cover all that is intended in the Fifth Commandment.

So according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “The fifth commandment requires us to respect and treat others, whether above, below, or equal to us, as their position or our relationship to the demands.” That is the modern English version. The original wording would cause any postmodern progressive to gnash their teeth. It says, “The fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honour, and performing the duties, belonging to everyone in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors or equals.”

That language of superiors and inferiors is not quite a bad as it sounds. The catechism is not denying that all people are equal in dignity and worth because we are all created in the image of God. But it is asserting

that we are not all equal when it comes to authority. Some people are given more authority than others. We are not equal when it comes to authority. And the catechism is reflecting the language of its time when it refers to people with more authority as superiors and people with less authority as inferiors. Those words do not mean what they mean to us. Language changes and so the modern English version of the Catechism speaks of people above, below or equal to us. Some people are above us – that is they have authority over us. Some people are below us – that is we have authority over them. And some people are on the same level as us as far as authority goes and they are our equals.

According to the Bible, being under authority is an important part of what it means to be human. We are under God's authority first of all. God is revealed as king and lawgiver and we are described as subjects and under God's law. And then God has designed various levels of authority as part of the organization of the human race. God has given authority to parents over their children, to husbands over their wives, to elders over their congregations and to civil rulers over the people in their realms. There are problems in every level of authority because of sin, but the problem is not the authority itself, rather the sinful exercise of authority. The various levels of authority are God's idea and we are designed to flourish by living in submission to the authorities that God has placed over us.

Now the Fifth Commandment does not begin with obedience, but honor. The language of the Fifth Commandment is that we are to honor our father and our mother. Obedience is one of the ways that we are to honor our parents, at least as long as we are young. We will get to that a little later on. Honoring is the more comprehensive category and that is where we will begin.

It is interesting that the Fifth Commandment, as it was first given by God at Mount Sinai, was not only addressed to young children. It was addressed to the whole congregation – to the whole people. It was addressed to adults, no less than it was addressed to children.

The way that it comes to us in the Ten Commandments is different in this respect from the way that Paul expressed it in the New Testament. In Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3, when Paul reiterates the Fifth

Commandment, he addresses himself to children. Colossians 3:20, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” Paul there is addressing one aspect of the Fifth Commandment – that children should obey their parents. The Fifth Commandment, as God proclaims it in the Ten Commandments, is addressed to adults no less than it is addressed to children. The Fifth Commandment is, first of all, about how **all us are** to treat our parents. Whether we are children or whether we are adults we are all to honor our parents.

When the rest of the Bible illuminates and expands on and illustrates the fifth commandment, it has quite a bit to say about how adult children are to treat their parents. The Bible makes it clear that God is very concerned about the way in which adult children treat their parents. There comes a time when the relationship between a parent and a child changes so that the parent no longer has the same authority over the child. This is not explicitly taught but it is implied in the institution of marriage when God says that a man must leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. The relationship between parents and children changes as children grow up and there comes a time when children leave their parents and are no longer under their direct authority. But what does not change is the command to honor our parents.

Probably the first priority of the Fifth Commandment has to do with taking care of parents when they are old. We see that in that one of the ways that the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment is fulfilled is through adult children taking care of their aged parents. There are a number of ways to understand the promise that is attached to the Fifth Commandment and one of them is that living long in the land that the LORD your God has given you in the ancient world required that your children take care of you.

We are still to take care of our parents when they are old, but most of our parents today are able to access physical care, at least, even if their children neglect them. In ancient times, if your children did not take care of you when you were old, you would probably not live very long in the land. As people became old and frail, they were very dependent upon their children and so the idea of living long in the land included

being taken care of by your children. If your children neglected you then, you would have a hard time surviving as an old person.

And so, if you wanted your children to take care of you when you were old and so live long in the land, you had better show them a good example of taking care of your parents. There is a multi-generational thing going on here. Adults who honor their parents have been trained to honor their parents and part of that training was the example of the older generation. And you were to be the same example for your children so that they would learn to honor you and take care of you when you were old. This is not the only way of thinking about the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment, but it is one of them. If you want to live long in the land, honor your parents in their old age and it is more likely that your children will honor you in your old age and make it possible for you to live long in the land.

The broader idea here in the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment is that God blesses obedience. Similar promises are made in connection with general obedience to the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy 11:18-21, God says to his people that if they keep the commands and teach their children to keep the commandments, “your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.” Generally speaking God blesses the lives of those who keep his commands.

This does not mean that everyone who honors his parents will live a long life. The ultimate fulfillment of the promise of a long life in the land is eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth. God clearly does not give every person who honors his parents a long life here on earth. Sometimes people who have honored their parents die young. God’s promises of blessings in this life do not mean that faithful people will sail through life without any problems. One of the issues that the Bible addresses is the fact that sometimes the wicked thrive as far as the things of this life are concerned and sometimes the righteous experience a great deal of suffering. The promise of a long life in the land must be interpreted in the light of eternity. Those who obey will be blessed. They will live under God’s favor and God will work everything

together for their good and they will inherit eternal life. All of that must be understood in the light of the gospel.

However, that is not the only thing to be said about this promise. While honoring your parents does not guarantee a long and trouble-free life, generally speaking God does bless his people in this life for obedience. Generally speaking obedience to God's law leads to a life that is better and less troubled by the inevitable results of sin. God designed us to live according to his laws and when we do that, life works better than if we rebel against his laws. So, to the extent that we keep God's laws we flourish in this life because we are living as God created us to live. Again, that is no guarantee of a trouble-free life, but in general terms life works much better when we follow the laws of our Creator.

Now in terms of the Fifth Commandment, life works better if we honor our parents. That is what God means when he promises a long life in the land. One of the places where the Bible develops this idea is in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs has a lot to say about honoring our parents by learning from the wisdom they have gained from experience and it has a lot to say about the blessings that follow from that. So, we read for instance in Proverbs 3:1-2 "My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you." Proverbs has a lot to say about learning wisdom from parents and wisdom is about success in life. Proverbs 3:13, "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gains understanding.... [Verses 16-17] Long life is in her right hand, in her left are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace."

Honoring your parents leads to a better life. Of course, the assumption here is that parents are godly and wise. The Ten Commandments are addressed to the community of the people of God. But even if parents are not godly, the world works much better when children honor their parents. Common grace operates here as well, and we see the truth of this in a negative way in our society in which individualism is destroying the family and children are often growing up not honoring their parents and the result of that is that we are living in a society that is broken and disordered in so many ways. What we are seeing in our society is the

opposite of the promise of living long in the land as a result of honoring your parents. While it is not universal, it is prevalent that children do not honor their parents and that is one of the factors that contributes to a society in which vast numbers of people are living like fools in biblical terms with the result of the brokenness that we see all around us. God has designed us in such a way that children learn wisdom from their parents and when the connection between parents and children is dysfunctional, the result is children who have not learned the lessons of wisdom and experience and the result if that is high levels of inability to thrive.

Now, as I said, the Fifth Commandment is just as concerned with adults honoring their parents as it is with children honoring their parents. One of the things that is striking about the biblical expansion of this subject is how often it addresses adult children dishonoring their parents in extreme ways.

For instance, listen to Exodus 21:15 and 17, "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.... Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." Ezekiel 22:7 "Father and mother are treated with contempt in you." And in the New Testament, you have Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees for using their traditions to get out of supporting their aged parents. Some of the Pharisees at least would dedicate their money to God so that they would not have to support their aged parents and Jesus call them out on that. And then there is the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son was more interested in his inheritance than he was in his relationship with his father. I think it is significant that the Bible gives us a number of examples of people treating their parents so badly.

This shows the depth and nature of our sinfulness. I don't mean to say that we all treat our parents badly, but the tendency of our sinful nature is to do so, and it is the only power of grace in our lives that enables us to fight against our sinful tendency. There are many examples in the world that are like the examples in the Bible of children treating their parents very badly by neglecting them or being more interested in their money than in loving and serving them. One of the things about sin is that it is manifested in selfishness and also in caring for things more

than for people. The root manifestation of that tendency is our tendency to value God's gifts more than we value a relationship with God and that sinful tendency can also manifest itself in our relationship with our parents.

The Fifth Commandment assumes our sinful tendency to dishonor our parents by neglecting them or worse. The Fifth Commandment assumes that we will be tempted to neglect our parents when we become adults and get caught up with our own lives. The Fifth Commandment assumes that we are predisposed to focus on our own pleasures and interests before fulfilling our responsibilities to our parents. And the grace of God in the gospel moves us in the opposite direction towards putting people before things and in this case the needs of our aged parents before our own priorities and selfish inclinations.

So, we adults are commanded to honor our parents. In our time and place, much of the time, our parents do not need us to support them financially, although if they are in need of financial support, we their children have the first responsibility to give it. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul makes it clear that family has the first responsibility to support family in need – before the church. The context there is widows who are in need and the question of when the church must support them. And in that context Paul writes, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially the members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” That is strong language. The gospel transforms us into people who are learning to love God and our neighbor, and our closest neighbor is our parents and other members of our families. If we do not care for them when they are in need, it is not likely we will sacrifice for anyone else either. So, if you don't provide for your parents when they are in need you are worse than an unbeliever.

The wording of the Fifth Commandment points to another way that we are to deal with our parents as adults. We are to honor them. As our parents age, they become weaker and more needy and sometimes their minds get weaker as well as their bodies. We are to honor them. We are to show them respect. Part of that is patience. They become dependent upon us. They need us to do things that they used to be able to do themselves. They forget things. Their minds are not as quick as they

used to be. You get the picture. Honoring our parents when they are old means treating them with respect and patiently dealing with the foggiest of their minds and when they forget things and when they repeat themselves.

And visiting them. Honoring them includes visiting them. It is not honoring them if they never see us because we are so busy. If we are too busy with other things it means that we are putting those other things before them and that is not treating them with respect. It's a challenge, because we are busy. Life can be hectic. But the Fifth Commandment requires that we honor our parents and that means being there for them.

Now for the children. Honoring your parents means showing them respect. It means obeying them. It means learning what they are trying to teach you. God has organized life in such a way that children are to learn about life from their parents and that involves obedience and respect and learning what they are teaching. Here are a few more proverbs that teach the importance of this. Proverbs 4:1 "Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight." Proverbs 6:20, "My son, keep your father's commandment and forsake not your mother's teaching." These are two of many proverbs that say the same thing.

Then you have the New Testament passages. Ephesians 6:1-2 "Children obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise), 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.'" There are two reasons that Paul gives here. First, he says, "for this is right." You are to obey your parents because it is the right thing to do. You are to obey your parents because God tells you to. When you are young, one of the key ways that you show honor to God is by obeying and honoring your parents. It is right to do so. But Paul also gives another reason based on the Fifth Commandment itself. "[T]hat it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

For a child of believing parents obeying and honoring them is the way to things going well for you in life. Obey your parents. Learn what they have to teach you and it will go well for you in your life. That's your job



when you are young, and the Bible tells you that the key way to prepare for a successful life is by obeying your parents. Its pretty straight forward. God keeps things simple for you when you are young. Honor your parents. That is how God prepares you for things going well for you in life. This is where you learn wisdom which is the fear of the Lord and wisdom is about living a life that is successful from God's perspective.

That, of course, is the most important thing. When God says that your life will go well if you honor your parents, he is not necessarily promising you an easy and comfortable live. God has many different ways of giving his people a good life. Sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it is hard. But if you are trusting in Jesus and seeking to please God in your life – it will be a good life and obeying your parents when you are young is one of the keys for life going well for you.

Now I want to remind you of the biblical context. God did not give his people the Ten Commandments as the way of salvation. He gave them to his people after he had already delivered them from Egypt. In our context, we must understand that keeping the commands is not the way of salvation; it is the way that saved people are called to live for the glory of God and for their true well-being. We should never think of God's laws as the way to be saved. If we are trusting in Jesus, we are saved and one of the signs that we are saved is that we want to keep the commandments because doing so is pleasing to God and because doing so is right and because doing so is the way of blessing and flourishing.

The commandments are not intended to be a burden. They should not be a heavy weight that burdens us. The weight of our sins has been taken by Jesus and so we are no longer under curse of the law. The weight is gone. Jesus told us that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

That does not mean that keeping the commandments is easy. It means that the burden is gone because Jesus has taken it. And so, honoring our parents whether we are young or whether we are older, should be motivated by love – love for God – love for God's law and love for life. The way to love life is to love God and love his commandments. 1 John 5:3 says, "For, this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

Hearing about the commandments should not put a weight or a burden upon us. That is the good news – the gospel of the commandments for saved people. Jesus has taken our sins and has paid their penalty and from that has come real life which means really being alive and living life to the full. They are not the way to life. But they are the way of life. And in that light: “Honor you father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

## Table Meditation

The reason that we can think about the commandments as a delight rather than as a burden is because of what we remember and what we focus on when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Because Jesus gave his life on the cross, we are free from the curse of the law and we are free from the bondage of sin and those two things together mean that we can think about the commandments as good news rather than as a word of condemnation. Jesus kept the law in our place and Jesus took the penalty for our law-breaking and if we are in him, the law is our friend rather than our enemy.

Whenever we consider the law we are reminded of our sins. Just going through and thinking about what is required reminds us of our own failures to keep the law perfectly. Hopefully we can thankfully think of God’s grace in our lives - also in enabling us, to some extent, to honor our parents, but we will no doubt also be aware that we have not honored our parents as we should. Apart from Christ, that is enough to condemn us. God has said, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them.”

So, God takes breaking his law seriously, including violations of the Fifth Commandment. But because of what we remember and celebrate at the Lord’s Supper, the law no longer condemns us, and we can think about the law without fear and without burden. We see the goodness of God’s law and we see that it is the way of life and the way of flourishing and so we are attracted to keeping it. All of this is rooted in Jesus what he did for us on the cross.

And you know, Jesus going to the cross was the most important instance of keeping the Fifth Commandment in the history of the world. Jesus came to earth because his Father had sent him. Jesus went to the cross for us because it was the will of his Father that he do so. Jesus makes much of the fact that he was obedient to his Father in all things and that the mission that he was on was a mission given to him by his Father. In John 14:31 Jesus said, "I do as the Father has commanded me." In John 8:49 Jesus said, "I honor my Father." Jesus went to the cross out of obedience to his Father and when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we celebrate what Jesus accomplished for us in obedience to his Father.

So, the law and the gospel come together at the cross. By his obedience to his Father's will, Jesus secured our salvation and because of what he accomplished for us by his life and by his death, we can consider also the Fifth Commandment and all the other commandments with delight rather than dread, even though we have only a small beginning of obedience. If we really think of what full obedience means, we will realize how far as come short and yet, because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, that news is not devastating, but we look to him for forgiveness and we look to him through his Spirit to grow in obedience because we are being transformed into the image of Christ and that is the abundant life that Jesus promises. It's all rooted in Jesus death. Our life is rooted in Jesus's death. And that is what we remember and celebrate and feed upon as we take part in the Lord's Supper.