

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 6) PUTTING UP WITH PARENTS”

Exodus 20:12; 1 Timothy 5:1-8

If you’ve not been around for quite a few weeks, or you’re a visitor this morning, or you just don’t really remember things too well, let me remind you that we are currently looking at the Ten Commandments on Sunday mornings – the “Maker’s Instructions”, if you like: the way to get the best out of life. There’s also an opportunity to discuss the issues raised by what’s said here on Sunday morning in the house groups during the week or at our Church Night on Tuesday evenings (details of all those things are on the weekly notice sheet). The beginning of a new year might be a good time to get involved in something like that.

Anyway, as we were seeing when we looked at the first four of these commandments before Christmas, these are instructions that God gave his people while they were escaping from the oppression of Egypt and making for their new home which God had promised them in Canaan. But they are really for all humanity, because God, as our Creator, knows exactly what we need to do to enjoy life to the full. They are our response to the love God has shown us already by creating us and allowing us to know him as our perfect Father.

But we’ve also been looking at the ways in which Jesus and the writers of the New Testament have interpreted them. That’s a way of reminding ourselves that they were not only given to the Jewish people who lived many centuries ago, but that they are still as relevant and important for us today as they were then. In the case of the one we’re looking at this morning, Jesus seems to have little to add to what we find in the Old Testament, although there is some advice in the New Testament that can help us in the application of this commandment.

We have here a commandment which, to a very great extent, applies to situations beyond those which think of today as the parent-child relationship. I believe it has something to say to us about our contribution to society as a whole and there are four things that we need to take note of from this commandment – *“Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”*

1. IT IS A COMMAND OF MORAL OBLIGATION

It can be very easy to look on the idea of parenthood – especially when we’re thinking of little babies or celebrating Mothering Sunday or whatever – through a mist of rosy sentimentality. (Those who are part of a family with disobedient toddlers or independently minded teenagers may disagree there.) We use terms such as “loving” and “adoring”. And looking from the outside it can sometimes seem that a lot of it is just a display of emotion.

But the word God uses here as he reveals his instructions to his people through Moses is not “love”. Love is so open to misinterpretation and to subjective schmaltz. Love changes: it’s very much dependent on how we feel. Now that’s not for one moment to suggest that love has no place in the relationship between parents and children – it most certainly does – but the word here is “honour”. That’s something far more objective. You love someone because of your feelings towards them, something within **you**. You honour someone because of their status, their position relative to you, the position in which God has put them – and that is outside you, external and fixed. Of course, as with so many other things, one without the other is a distortion, for, as one writer puts it, *“honour and love need each other ... without honour, love lacks structure and can be destructive.”* (Lewis Smedes)

Our parents, whatever age they are, can occasionally (or maybe often) be downright annoying, and it’s very difficult to love them. But they are still our parents and, as such, worthy of honour. In those times when they seem to have no idea about what you really want to do, when they seem completely out of

touch with the things you are involved in, when they appear (from your point of view) to be deliberately wrecking your life, they are still worthy of respect and, yes, of loving submission to their experience and wisdom. As we get older the situation can change and different factors come into play, but there's no doubting the need to honour them. Lewis Smedes (again) writes this, "*From the day the child is born to the day the parents die – and even reaching beyond the grave as a relationship to an ineradicable memory – everything in the relationship changes except the moral duty of honour.*" That may be why Terry Wogan refers to his children as "*the future care providers*"!

2. IT IS A COMMAND FOR ALL CHILDREN, YOUNG AND OLD

Many of you are probably sitting there this morning thinking (as you often do), "This doesn't apply to me at all. I can think of one or two young people who ought to be listening jolly hard to this. He ought to be telling all this to the Sunday School. I'm well past this." Well, you're not past it at all, and for several reasons.

a) **The important idea is relationship, not age.**

This is not saying that only **young** children should honour their elders. After all, the people who heard these commandments for the first time were not children but adults. It is saying that **all** people should honour their parents. As we have just heard, our parents remain our parents until their death. It is as relevant a command for the sixty-year old with a father of ninety as it is for a twelve year old with a mother of thirty five.

b) **In Israel the family was an extended unit.**

In the society into which these instructions were first given, the whole family lived together, so there were grandparents, uncles, great-aunts and so on all in the same unit (a bit like a perpetual Christmas lunch, but without the good food). In those situations it was very clear to the youngest how they should behave because of the example of the parents' attitude and behaviour towards the grandparents. Do you treat your parents and talk about them in the way that you want your children to talk about and respond towards you?

c) **The New Testament emphasises it.**

Jesus made it very clear that the obligation of honour towards parents was something very important and was not to be dismissed even for the apparent sake of religious obligation (*Mark 7:9-13*). And in those words we heard from Paul's letter to his young friend Timothy he makes it clear that we are to honour our parents by ensuring that they are properly cared for in their old age. It's a way of "*putting our religion into practice*" and what is envisaged here is quite obviously the duty of grown-up children. In our society, which is so different in many ways from the society into which Moses, Jesus or Paul were preaching, ensuring that they are properly cared for may not necessarily mean that we are the actual carers. The provision that is made by the state and the private sector for looking after the elderly can help lift the burden of actual day to day care from us, but it does not offer us the option of ignoring them. There is no shame in conceding that an ailing parent will be better looked after in a residential home by professionals, but that doesn't mean they can be packed off and forgotten about.

3. IT IS A COUNTER TO INDIVIDUALISM

Sir Fred Catherwood, who was a vice-president of the European Union and a Christian writer, commenting on this commandment says, "*The fifth commandment is against the cult of individualism, the belief that we live to ourselves and die to ourselves; the belief that no other living soul has a right over us, to command honour and respect.*" It's very true, isn't it, that as we grow through our teenage years we want to throw off all the shackles and restrictions of childhood and live according to our own rules. It seems only natural, doesn't it, and there does come a time, parents, when you have to accept that your children are now old enough to think for themselves. You can't always hang on to them and you need to

let them make their own way in the world. It's very sad when you see men and women who are still kept under close scrutiny by their parents using a form of emotional blackmail – think of Ronnie Corbett's character Timothy in *Sorry!* or Principal Skinner on *The Simpsons*.

But usually we find that after a period of rebellion and resentment we once again come round to see that we need to take other people into account. Within the family that is especially true and we cannot think that we can ignore those amongst whom we live. It's not, as Ogden Nash put it, "*Children aren't happy with nothing to ignore./That's what parents were created for.*" In an age when everything seems to be "me, me, me", we need to be showing that there is an alternative and the best place to start is within the family. The way we behave towards other people is a response to God's love to us. The Tyndale Commentary on these commandments says, "*The reality of our stated love to God is shown by the reality of our expressed love towards our fellow men and women.*" That's true of all these six human directed commandments and particularly true in the family.

4. IT IS A COMMAND FOR SOCIETY

Although we have said that this verse contrasts children and parents, rather than children and elders, there is still a sense in which it points us to a proper respect for those who are older and more experienced than we are. That's a theme which occurs again and again in the Bible – look at *Leviticus 19:32*, *Job 32:6*, *1 Timothy 5:1,2*. In a culture that seems increasingly scornful of the elderly – and in which so many of us who are getting older go to extraordinary lengths to try and disguise the fact – we, as Christians, should be setting an example in our churches and in our families of respect and honour. We can easily put so much time and effort into catering for children and young people (which is a quite laudable and worthy cause) and yet forget those whose sacrifice in past years has made possible what we have today. It's difficult, I know, when you're standing in the queue at the Post Office behind the person who wants to discuss all the week's international news with the cashier or the person trying to use a chip and pin machine when their only concession to modern technology up until then has been using a biro rather than fountain pen!

But one commentator uses this idea to explain the second part of this commandment – "*so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God has given you.*" Alan Cole writes, "*Those who build a society in which old age has an honoured place may with confidence expect to enjoy that place themselves one day.*" If we allow our society to get to the stage where parents and the elderly are abused, ignored or scorned, that will be our lot as we ourselves become parents and/or grow old. Much criticism is levelled at our youth today for their scornful attitude towards older people, but they've picked that up from somewhere, from someone. They've picked it up from our generation who have started to look down on older people and who have tried so hard not to appear old ourselves that we've given the impression that it's something shameful.

Let's always try to ensure that our family relations are such that they will appear attractive to those around us, and let us remember that this is not something that we can choose to obey or ignore, but it's an obligation to a God who, as we have seen in past weeks, has given himself in love for us. He gave himself so that we could be forgiven, so that the mistakes of the past could be put behind us. So let me just say this in closing: there may be some here this morning who are wishing now that you'd been a bit more honouring to your parents but they are now too old or ill to recognise you. They may even have died with your relationship with them less than it should have been. God can forgive that if you want him to: there's no point carrying around a burden of guilt that cannot be discharged in any other way than by bringing it to him. Ask for his help now and enjoy the good memories, not the bad.

House group notes follow on next page

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This commandment has something to say to us about our contribution to society as a whole: it goes far beyond simply the parent-child relationship.

1. IT IS A COMMAND OF MORAL OBLIGATION

The command is not for us to "love" our parents, but to "honour" them. Love is very much dependent on our emotions and feelings, but honour is attached to age, status, experience. Almost every other aspect of our relationship with our parents changes over the years except the duty of honour.

2. IT IS A COMMAND FOR ALL CHILDREN, YOUNG AND OLD

God does not give this command solely for young children: we are never free of the obligation to honour our parents.

a) The important idea is relationship not age

It is therefore relevant for us all.

b) In Israel the family was an extended unit

The young children would have seen the example their parents set in looking after their grandparents. We must not forget the example we set our own children.

c) The New Testament emphasises it

Look at what Jesus has to say in *Mark 7:9-13* and at *1 Timothy 5:4*. Looking after parents is one way of "*putting our religion into practice.*"

3. IT IS A COUNTER TO INDIVIDUALISM

We cannot ignore those amongst whom we live and the attitudes that are formed within the family are important ones for our relationships with the wider world. The way we behave towards other people is a response to God's love to us.

4. IT IS A COMMAND FOR ALL SOCIETY

We cannot neglect the fact that the Bible exhorts us to show respect for all our elders. Look at *Leviticus 19:32; Job 32:6; 1 Timothy 5:1,2*. In a culture that seems increasingly scornful of the elderly, Christians should be setting an example.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think parents are considered worthy of a special commandment about how to treat them?
2. What does "honour" really involve? Is it the same as "obey"?
3. We now have a system of social care that is administered largely by the state. What are the implications of that for the duty of care we have for our parents? Should we still struggle to look after them at home when they become old and infirm? Why/why not?
4. Why is respect for those older than ourselves emphasised in the Bible? Should we respect everyone who is older than us, regardless of their behaviour and attitudes?
5. What can we do within the church to show our "honour" for those who are getting on in years?