

Article # 1

Between Child and Parent—Honoring Father and Mother (Exodus 20:12)

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you (Exodus 20:12; also Deuteronomy 5:16). Since this is really the first occurrence of the command to honor parents it would be well to make several observations about the commandment, which is given:

(1) The commandment is given to children, specifying their obligation toward their parents. The terms “father” and “mother” are synonymous with “parents,” thus we have spelled out here the obligation of children to honor their parents.

(2) There are no indications here as to the age of the children who are to honor their parents. We would tend to think that this commandment is given to young children regarding their obligation to their parents, but this is not so. Other passages will apply this general command to specific age groups, but this command is deliberately broad in scope.

(3) There is no particular action required here. Children are not told here to do anything in particular to honor their parents. We should assume, and rightly so, that different actions will be required at different times, of different people. We must therefore look elsewhere in Scripture to determine how we are to honor our parents at any given point in time.

The Old Testament Scriptures fill in many of the details as to what constitutes honor and dishonor, with respect to parents. When parents are dishonored, they are cursed (Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9; Proverbs 20:20), or, according to Proverbs, not blessed (30:11). This disregard for parents can result in physically striking them (Exodus 21:15; Proverbs 19:26), and even of robbing them (Proverbs 28:24). The child can dishonor his parents by living a lifestyle which is contradictory to that of his parents and of society, including disobedience, stubbornness, rebelliousness, drunkenness, and gluttony (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

(4) The Fifth Commandment is the first of the commandments, which deal with our obligations to men. The first four commandments have dealt with the Israelite’s obligation to God. This commandment introduces those, which specify his duty with respect to men. This commandment pertains only to the obligation between child and parents. It is also a positive command, followed by prohibitions.

(5) The Fifth Commandment is the first commandment, which is accompanied with a promise. The promise, as I understand it, is two-fold. First, it is a promise of long life. Second, it is the promise of a long life, lived out in the land of Canaan. As it stands, the Fifth Commandment is given specifically to the Israelites, with a promise, which pertains to them. The New Testament will adapt and modify this commandment to apply to the Gentile Christians and the church, leaving the commandment in nearly the same form as found here in the Old Testament.

The promise of long life in the land of Canaan is given elsewhere, but it is the reward for keeping all of God's commandments, not just the Fifth Commandment: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it" (Deuteronomy 30:15-16).

Why is obedience to the Fifth Commandment linked with the blessings attached to the keeping of all the commandments?

In addition to the fact that one must keep every commandment to keep all commandments, the Fifth Commandment plays a special role with respect to the rest of the commandments. The laws of God are to be conveyed to subsequent generations of Israelites primarily from the parents to their children. Thus, the emphasis of Deuteronomy on the teaching of the Law to children. If children are going to listen to their parents and learn to love the Law, they must first respect and honor their teachers—their fathers and mothers. **The honoring of parents is thus a prerequisite to the teaching of the Law from one generation to the next.**

If children honor their parents they will heed their instruction. If they heed their instruction, they will keep the whole Law of God. If they keep the Law of God they will not do harm to their fellow-Israelites. Viewed negatively, honoring parents causes the child to be inclined to avoid the evils of murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting. Viewed more positively, honoring parents has a high correlation with honoring others and caring for them. This is emphasized in two passages of Proverbs: There is a kind of man who curses his father, and does not bless his mother. There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness. There is a kind—oh how lofty are his eyes! And his eyelids are raised in arrogance. There is a kind of man whose teeth are like swords, and his jaw teeth like knives, to devour the afflicted from the earth, and the needy from among men (Proverbs 30:11-14).

The words of King Lemuel, the oracle that his mother taught him: What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows? Do not give your strength to women, Or your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink. Lest they drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted. ... Open your mouth for the dumb, For the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy (Prov. 31:1-5, 8-9).

There is also a relationship between honoring parents and honoring God. Not only does the Fifth Commandment relate to and facilitate the keeping of the last commandments, it also is very much related to the keeping of those commandments pertaining to the worship of God. This is especially apparent in Malachi 1:6: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Thy name?'"

Those who would honor God must also honor their parents. Those who honor parents have already begun to honor God. Our earthly fathers are, on the one hand, God's representatives, instructing and disciplining their children in His place. On the other hand, parents serve to illustrate the way in which God is at work in the lives of His children, as a Father. This is seen, for example, in Proverbs chapters 2 and 3, where the father's care for his child is likened to God's fatherly care for His children.

Honoring parents was a vitally important obligation, signaled by its inclusion in the Ten Commandments, by the death penalty attached to its flagrant violation, and by the detail, which we are given about the evidences of honoring parents or its neglect. Honoring parents was fundamental for the passing on of Israel's faith from one generation to another. It was also important because it enhanced and facilitated the honoring of God (commandments 1-4) and others (commandments 6-10).