

“Honor Your Father and Your Mother” (An Exposition of Exodus 20:12)¹

Introduction

The fifth commandment is the first commandment of what is known as the second table of God's law. That is, the first four commandments deal with love for God, and the latter six commandments deal with love for our neighbor. Puritan writer Thomas Watson (1620-1686) sums it up well:

“By the first table, we walk religiously towards God; by the second, we walk religiously towards man. He cannot be good in the first table that is bad in the second.”²

The commandments of God are such that they are interrelated in many ways. They are distinct, but never separate. That is why our Lord Jesus included love for neighbor (and not just love for God) when He spoke of the greatest commandment. In Matthew 22:34–40 it is written:

“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.””

Love for God and love for our neighbor must *always* go together. 1 John 4:20–21 states this plainly:

“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. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

If you don't love your brother, you don't love God, and you can't love your brother or your neighbor properly if you don't love God.

The second table of the law, starting with the fifth commandment, teaches us that our faith in Christ and our profession of Christianity *must involve and affect all of life*. Thomas Boston writes:

“Religion must run through the whole course of our conversation [i.e. life], and mix itself with all our actions, those that respect [i.e. have to do with] men! as well as those that respect God immediately. Therefore in vain do they pretend to religion, that make no conscience of their duty to men.”³

Does *your* faith in Jesus Christ *run through the whole course of your life*? Does it mix itself with all of your actions? Or is it compartmentalized away from the other parts of your life, and insulated from the way that you live?

Let the fifth commandment teach us that, *even from our youngest days*, our faith and life must intersect at all points, so that our relationship to God through faith in Christ changes everything.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *The Ten Commandments*, p.122

³ *The Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, Vol.2, p.205

Four our sermon points this morning we are going to simply follow the same outline of our subject that is found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That is, *first*, what are the duties required of us in the fifth commandment? *Second*, what are the sins forbidden in the fifth commandment? And *lastly*, what is the promise of blessing attached to obeying this commandment?

The Duties Required by the Fifth Commandment

First things first, what are the duties required by the fifth commandment? On the surface, it is the honoring and obeying of our parents. It is instructive for us that when the Lord begins to turn our attention to love *for our neighbor*, the place in which He starts is our relationship with our parents.

They are typically the first neighbor (i.e. the first people) with whom we come into contact, and so they are the first ones to whom we owe love. Perhaps most important when it comes to this commandment, our father and mother are also typically *the very first authority figures in our lives*.

John Calvin summarizes the intent of this commandment as being “that we must revere those whom the Lord has set over us and show them honor and obedience, acknowledging the good that they have done us” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p.145). And so we first learn (or *fail* to learn) to honor and obey those who are in authority over us, *in the arena of the home or family*.

Notice that it is “**honor**” (and *not* mere outward obedience) that we are to render to our earthly fathers and mothers. If as children we fail to learn to honor and submit to authority in the home, chances are we will struggle mightily to learn to submit to the many other authorities that God places over us in our lives. For this reason Thomas Watson, once wrote, “Nothing sooner shortens life than disobedience to parents.”⁴

In the New Testament the Apostle Paul actually quotes this commandment, interprets it, and applies it to believers today. In Ephesians 6:1-4 he writes,

“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.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Here Paul clearly teaches (in case anyone had any doubt) that *the ten commandments still apply today. And they even apply to children!* One of the primary applications of the fifth commandment is that children are to (as Paul puts it above) ‘**obey their parents in the Lord.**’ Why? Because “**this is right.**” And we know that it is “**right**” for children to ‘obey their parents in the Lord’ precisely because God has commanded it in His Word.

This teaches us that following the Lord is *not* just something for grown-ups, but rather starts very early on in life – even in childhood! A big part of a child following Christ involves honoring and obeying his or her parents.

Kids, are you being respectful to your parents? Do you obey their instruction? Are you *obeying them in the Lord*? That is God's will for your life. That is a way to live out your faith from your youngest days.

4 *The Ten Commandments*, p.132

But the commandment to “**Honor your father and your mother**” applies to much more than just the relationships and authority structure within the family. This commandment is most commonly understood or interpreted as dealing with *all earthly relationships and authority structures in general*.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* likewise states that what is required of us in the fifth commandment is “the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to everyone in their several [i.e. various] places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals” (Q.64).

Some of those various “places and relations” include the *family*, the *church*, and the *state*, just to name a few. As the *Westminster Larger Catechism* tells us:

“Q. 124. *Who are meant by father and mother in the fifth commandment?*

A. By *father and mother*, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God’s ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.”

And so this commandment *continues* to have a great deal of practical application for us in a number of ways *throughout our lives*. For example, employees must learn to honor and obey their employers and supervisors. That is the will of God for you if you are employed by someone – to do your job well and to show proper respect to your employer and supervisors.

If you are a Christian, has it ever occurred to you that you are to serve God in how you do your job, and in how you relate to your boss and even to your coworkers? In Colossians 3:23–24 the Apostle Paul writes,

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

Simply put, God cares about how you do your job. And how you do your job is to be a reflection of your love for the Lord. We are to work as if we work for the Lord Jesus – because ultimately that is exactly the case! That should change how we approach the work that God has called us to.

The flip-side is also true. If you are an employer, manager, or supervisor, part of doing your job well involves showing proper care and respect to your employees and subordinates. In Colossians 4:1 Paul writes, **“Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”** In other words, God is every boss’s Boss. The gospel should transform the workplace!

Another area of practical application of this commandment is *our relationship to the governing authorities*. In Romans 13:1 the Apostle Paul writes, **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”**

No earthly government or authority figure is perfect. Frankly, most are *far* from being such. But that does *not* mean that we may throw off all due civility, respect, and even submission to them.

Why? Because, like it or not, **“there is no authority except from God.”** Ultimately *God* put them there, and *each one must one day answer to Him for the way they rule or govern*. No doubt that is part of the reason why Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:1–2, **“that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions”**

Of course this does *not* mean that there are no limits to this honor and submission. In Acts 5:29 Peter and the other apostles told the high priest and the council, **“We must obey God rather than men.”** *When earthly authorities command what God forbids, or forbid what God commands, it is our duty as believers in Christ to obey God rather than men.*

The Sins Forbidden by the Fifth Commandment

That brings us to *the sins forbidden by the fifth commandment*. Essentially, this would implicitly include anything and everything that is contrary to the duties required, If honoring father and mother is *required*, then any form of *dishonoring our parents* is implicitly *forbidden*.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q/A 65 tells us, “The fifth commandment forbids the neglecting of, or doing anything against, the honor and duty which belongs to every one in their several places and relations.” People in our day think nothing of dishonoring and speaking evil of the various authorities that God has placed over us.

This is obviously true in politics and the so-called “civil” realm. And it is increasingly true when it comes to family matters. How common is it for people to blame all of their problems on their parents, for example?

The *Heidelberg Catechism* includes one question (#104) on this commandment, and it anticipates the most common objection to godly submission, in that it tells us that we must “also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.”

We are to bear with the weaknesses and infirmities of the authorities whom God has placed over us in His infinite wisdom. That includes parents, husbands, officers in the church, and civil authorities, among others. And the reason, as always, is that “it pleases God to govern us by their hand.”

Ask yourself this, how do you think and speak of the earthly authorities whom God has placed over you? Disagreeing with them, even criticizing them (depending on the way that it is done, of course) may be necessary at times. But do you show them the respect and honor that is due to them for the sake of their God-given office?

In his book, *The Good News We Almost Forgot*, Kevin DeYoung writes,

“I doubt many of us regularly feel convicted by the Fifth Commandment, but we probably should. How are we really doing? Do we joyfully submit to parents, husbands, and the rule of law? Are we patient with pastors and senators and middle managers? Do we give glad respect to denominational executives, committee chairpersons, and department heads? Do we take care of our aging parents without grumbling and complaining? Do we ever consider their feelings and desires above our own when making plans for the holidays? *Would we be happy if our young children treated us like we, now grown, treat our parents?*” (p.187, italics added)

No doubt we should probably all feel more convicted by the 5th commandment than we usually do. The fact that so many of us do not is almost certainly to be attributed to a lack of self-examination and meditation upon this commandment.

The Promise of Blessing and Obeying the Fifth Commandment

Last but not least, the Lord gives us a promise of blessing attached to obedience to this commandment. And just as the command itself applies to us from our youngest days and continues on throughout the rest of our lives, even so the same holds true for His promise of blessing.

Again, Exodus 20:12 says, “**Honor your father and your mother, *that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.***” (Italics added) *Watson* says of this, “And that you may see how well it pleases God, he bestows a reward upon it.”⁵

Remember that passage in Ephesians chapter 6 where Paul cites this commandment? Did you notice that he cites the promise of blessing as well? He says, “**this is the first commandment with a promise. . . “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”** (v.2–3)

Notice that Paul clearly teaches that, not just *the commandment itself*, but also *the promise of blessing* that the Lord attached to the commandment *still applies today as well*. God graciously gives us promises of blessing in order to encourage us in our efforts toward obedience!

The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in its chapter on the law of God speaks of the usefulness of God’s law for believers, and of the blessings that are promised to us for obedience to His commandments:

“. . . The promises of it, in like manner, show them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourages to the one, and deters from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.” (19.6)

God knows what is best for us, and He commands us to walk in his ways accordingly. And He even gives us blessings along the way in order to encourage us when that way sometimes proves to be difficult. *God is good, and even his commandments are given for our good as well!*

Conclusion

We may not give the 5th commandment much thought, but we should. And if we were to do so, no doubt most of us would find plenty of need for confession, repentance, and improvement. May God work in us what is pleasing in His sight, by His grace and Holy Spirit, to the glory of the name of Jesus Christ.

5 Ibid, p.131