

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:12

To understand more about the fifth commandment and its implications for us today.

The Second Table

The last four sessions have been largely committed to our duty before God, and thus the first four commandments are often categorized as the so-called “first table” in the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment begins the so-called “second table,” wherein the focus of duty is shifted away from God to our fellow man. This is why, no doubt, Jesus answered the question concerning the “greatest commandment” by quoting not only Deuteronomy 6:5 to “love the LORD your God,” but also “a second one like it” from Leviticus 19:18 to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Read the Text:

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12, ESV)

Study the Text:

Honor

What does it mean to “honor” your father and mother (Ex. 20:12)? Below is a breakdown of some suggested ideas concerning how to obey the fifth commandment.

REVERENCE OR RESPECT?

In some sense, “honoring” a parent might be seen as “revering” them. For example, Leviticus 19:3 states: “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.” The Hebrew term underlying the English translation means “to be afraid or to respect.” This isn’t a timid or cowardly fear, but rather a respectful one. Often the fifth commandment is relegated to a very outward focused respect for parents, when in actuality, this misses the mark. It isn’t that parents should merely be outwardly respected, but inwardly revered which leads to a kind of genuine respect for them. This is why passages such as Exodus 21:15 or Deuteronomy 27:16 prohibit the striking of parents or even the cursing of parents. These are actions that begin inwardly, in the heart of the rebellious child, and manifest accordingly. In fact, this kind of inward disdain for one’s parents was punished with death (Deut. 21:18-21). Respect is also something in our modern culture that is “earned,” whereas “reverence” is not based on any action of the parent, but merely on their identity. This means that even if your parents are ungodly and ungracious people, you can revere them because their roles matter to the heart of God with regard to the institution of the family.

SUBMISSION OR OBEDIENCE?

John Frame writes, “Submission may be understood as part of respect or reverence. When we respect someone, we hear him with respect, not assuming from the outset that we know more than he. From those we respect, we expect to learn, and we are willing to change out of respect for their words. When we must

disagree, we do so reluctantly, and we express even that disagreement in respectful language.”¹ Submission to parents means being willing to learn from them, hence the instruction of 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.” Even in disagreement, submission to parents means correcting them with reverence. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father.” There is a way by which you ought to interact with people, in part, based on their age.

FINANCIAL CARE

Another way by which we are to honor our parents is by caring for them at the end of their lives when they are unable to do so themselves. 1 Timothy 5:4-8 says, “But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God... Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” Now, to be clear, this is for parents who are unable to care for themselves. It is not for parents who simply do not want to care for themselves. There is a marked and important difference.

OBEDIENCE TO GOD

One question that often arises among church members is, “How do I honor my parents if they are unsafe people, or are not believers?” In some instances (my *own* included), one of my parents is unsafe (and actually in prison). He is there because he is guilty of committing a crime for which he has no remorse. How do I continue to honor him if he is unsafe to even be around? This is where it becomes important to remember that the “second table” of the Ten Commandments is built upon the “first table.” You begin the Ten Commandments thinking about the ways in which you are to honor, love, and worship the LORD. Only once you have begun doing that will you get right the commands to love others as well. That means, then, in some sense - fulfilling the remaining commandments depends on your love for and obedience to Christ. That is the ultimate aim of the parent for their child; to live a godly life, yoked to the Lord (Prov. 22:6). So how do I honor my father who is unsafe? I continue to honor God with my own life in spite of my father. Nothing could be more honoring of a parent, whether they recognize it or not, than for their child to pursue and obey the Lord Jesus Christ in all categories of life. Every time I preach or teach or exercise my spiritual gifting to edify the body of Christ to the glory of Christ, I am honoring my parents. Whether they recognize that is not my responsibility to ensure.

Father and Mother

We’ve looked briefly at what it means to “honor” father and mother, but more important, what does “father and mother” actually entail? Surprisingly, there are a lot of opinions. For most, it simply means your caregivers you refer to as “father and mother” (whether biological or adopted). For others, like the *Westminster Divines*, it means something else.

WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM

Question 124 asks: “Who are meant by father and mother in the fifth commandment?” It answers: “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.” While it might seem like a stretch, the Scriptures do use family metaphors for a wide-ranging number of people including governing authorities (Gen. 45:8; Jdg. 5:7; Isa. 49:23), military heads (2 Kg. 5:13), prophets (2 Kg. 2:12), wisdom teachers (Ps. 34:11; Prov. 1:8), church leaders (1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim.

¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 579.

1:2; Titus 1:4), 10 and older people (Lev. 19:32; Tim. 5:1). The fifth-commandment would even be connected to God Himself, who is "God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:6; see also Mal. 1:6).

Westminster sees the duty of the Christian in light of the fifth commandment more broadly than we typically think of it. It goes on to ask in Question 126: "What is the general scope of the fifth commandment?" It answers: "The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals." We are not to think of the terms "inferior" or "superior" in terms of worth or value in identity, but rather in the possession of authority. In other words, the fifth commandment should shape how you relate to people who are in authority over you, people over whom you are in authority, and people who are your peers or equals.

And yet, to draw out even further distinctions, the larger catechism asks Question 130: "What are the sins of superiors?" In other words, how would someone in authority over another break the fifth commandment? It answers: "The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them, an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure; commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them unduly; careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger; provoking them to wrath; or any way dishonoring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behavior." This line of reasoning is drawn out from passages like Ephesians 5:21, which call for the mutual submission of all people in the church as they are filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). This is for "inferiors" and "superiors." They are to submit, not out of reverence for the inferior person, which would make no sense, but out of "reverence for Christ," who is superior over all believers, regardless of status, as "head of the church" (Eph. 5:23).

In my personal opinion, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* stretches the boundaries of "father and mother" beyond the natural reading of the law. While I agree with the overall assessment of how Christians ought to engage with people above and below them in terms of authority, I do think the fifth commandment has the *operative* father and mother in mind.

That Your Days May Be Long

The fifth commandment is, according to Paul, "the first commandment with a promise," but what does that mean? Certainly the context of the Jewish person in the old covenant shapes this differently than believers in the new covenant. That is evidenced by the "land" mentioned here, versus the appeal to a future hope for believers in the new covenant (Mk. 10:29-31). But the thrust of this is the same regardless: when you honor your parents, you set an example for your own children for what generational blessing looks like. Not withstanding toxic or unsafe parents, the family is central to all of God's redemptive purposes. When Christians live with reverence, submission, and financial care for their parents and are pursuing obedience to Christ, the family prospers.

What About Now?

One major takeaway is the importance of reverence for the "office" of parent. Whether your specific parents are noble in their role is irrelevant to the way in which we revere the role of the parent in general. Another takeaway is the importance of shaping our interactions with not only our parents, but anyone in authority over us, with a respectful and submissive tone. That is not to say that we should subject ourselves to toxic people,

but that we should remain open to learning from our elders even when they are fraught with mistakes. Another takeaway is the importance of giving financial care to our aging parents when they are actually unable to care for themselves. In the same way parents care for their children when they are unable to care for themselves, children should care for parents when they are unable to do so.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:12. What does it say?

2. According to the notes, what does the word “honor” possibly entail?

Day Two

1. According to the notes, what does the terms “father” and “mother” possibly entail?

2. Why does obedience to the fifth commandment include a promise of blessing?

Day Three

1. Read 1 Timothy 5:4-8. Summarize this passage in your own words.

2. What does Paul liken the believer who does not care for his parents to?

Day Four

1. Read Mark 10:29-31. What blessing is conveyed in this new covenant understanding of the fifth commandment?

2. Read 1 Timothy 5:1. What does this passage teach about the way in which Christians should speak to older people? How does this apply to the way in which we speak to our parents?

Discuss the Text!**Week 52 Discussion: Parents**

The major focus of the fifth commandment is the way in which we relate to our parents with love, submission, reverence, and financial support. Talk as a group about your relationship with your parents and how that impacts the way you either obey or disobey the fifth commandment.

1. Icebreaker: What is your relationship with your parents like?
2. Is it easy or difficult to “honor” your father and mother? Why?
3. Can you honor your father and mother if they are no longer living? If so, how so?
4. How has your relationship with your parents growing up impacted your relationship with authority figures in general?
5. Do you think “father” and “mother” can mean more than biological or adoptive father and mother? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. If you have deep wounds from your parents, have you ever taken a freedom group to work through those hurts? If not, why not?
7. Kid Talk (For Home): Ask your child what they think “honoring” you means. Talk about how you feel honor with them, and give them some examples of how they might be more respectful of the “role” of parent.

Takeaways:

1. The fifth commandment is about honoring your father and mother.
2. “Honor” possibly entails submission, reverence, financial aid, and obedience to God.
3. “Father” and “mother” possibly entails anyone in authority over you.
4. The fifth commandment has a promise of prosperity attached to it (although it is not necessarily a material prosperity).