



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 39 - September 28, 2008

104 Q. *What is God's will for you in the fifth commandment?*

A. That I honor, love, and be loyal to my father and mother and all those in authority over me; that I obey and submit to them, as is proper, when they correct and punish me; and also that I be patient with their failings—for through them God chooses to rule us.

Adolescent rebellion seems like a rite of passage for us. In the Old Testament, it was anything but. There was great pressure on parents and children to take the fifth commandment seriously. According to Deuteronomic law, if a man had a stubborn and rebellious son who did not obey his parents, though they disciplined him, the parents were to bring him before the elders, publicly denounce their son, and *the parents* presented him before the men of the city where he would be stoned to death (Deut. 21:18-21 cf. Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9; Prov. 20:20; 30:11). 3000 years later, Calvin explained the harsh punishment with this rationale: "Nature itself ought in a way to teach us this. Those who abusively or stubbornly violate parental authority are monsters, not men! Hence the Lord commands that all those disobedient to their parents be put to death. For since they do not recognize those whose efforts brought them into the light of day, they are not worthy of its benefits." Kids have always made mistakes, but clearly, God's people have not always been so lenient with rank insubordination. Honoring our parents—father *and* mother—requires reverence, obedience, and gratefulness. Instead of stubbornness, we listen; instead of rebellion, we submit; instead of complaint, we thank. We are commanded to honor our parents for several reasons. First, because God has given them a position of honor. They are not despots with a phony claim to power, but stewards of God's authority. "You're not the boss of me" may be a common childhood cry, but when directed toward parents it is not biblical. Second, we obey the fifth commandment as part of our devotion to Jesus. We honor father and mother *in the Lord* (Eph. 6:1), following his example and being transformed by his grace. Third, we honor Mom and Dad because blessings come to those who do (6:2-3). The fifth command is the first one with a promise. This promise is not a mathematical guarantee of success, but a general assurance that children are better off when they listen to their parents.

Of course, obedience has its limits. Authority can be abused and parents can make nefarious commands. Even Calvin argued that if our earthly parents aren't leading us in the direction of our heavenly Father, they cease to be true parents. Acts 5:29 teaches us that we should obey God rather than men. So clearly if your parents command of you what God forbids or they forbid what God commands, you cannot and must not obey your parents (the first table takes precedence over the second). But even in these cases, we can still be respectful of our parents and honor them, even if it would be wrong to obey them.

This raises the question of how grown (or almost grown children) should relate to their parents. Certainly, a lifelong respect and patience for our parents is in order, even deference wherever possible. But there is some point at which parents should not expect the same obedience from their grown children as they did when they were young. Whether this happens during the college years or at financial independence (a totally different matter entirely) is open to negotiation based on culture and family situation. At the very least, the biblical injunction to leave and cleave strongly suggests some kind of change in the parent-child relationship at marriage. A new household is formed, one that is under a new headship and new authority.

Speaking of marriage, the issue of parental consent prior to engagement is another sticky wicket. Again, I'm hesitant to lay down a hard and fast rule. The men of my generation seem more eager to ask for explicit permission from the future father-in-law before popping the question than my parents' generation. I happen to think this is a good idea and shows biblical respect for a father's authority, but the fact that so many Christians have approached the matter differently makes me cautious to demand the awkward "talk to her dad" conversation as a prerequisite to marriage (though I always encourage it). Nor do I think

parental non-blessing constitutes automatic veto power for every proposed marriage. Parents can object for terrible reasons (he comes from a poor family, she's a Christian, etc.) and while we sometimes speak wistfully of arranged marriages (which can work out wonderfully), they can be equally disastrous. Having said all that, my counsel to couples has always been to seek their parents' blessing, listen to what they say, show great patience, and even be willing to delay the marriage for the sake of further communication. The error we face as a part of the American culture does not usually fall on the too much deference to parents side of the ledger.

This is true beyond the specific question of marriage. While parental authority is not absolute, our problem in American culture is not knee-jerk obedience to parents but a lack of respect for parents and our elders in general. We consider it a given that teenagers rebel. They do sometimes. I pray mine won't, but who knows. But let's not assume it must happen or that it is good when it does. Independence, learning to think for oneself, trying and failing sometimes—these are steps toward adulthood. But stubbornness, rebellion, and disobedience are not good. It's not the right of American teenagers to break the fifth commandment, no matter what friends or hormones tell us. Never before, has our cultural ethos allowed for and even encourage encouraged youthful immaturity. Kids are coddled and their preferences catered to, in the home and certainly in the society at large. Contrary to feminist fears, most households are less patriarchy and more kindergarchy.

Sadly, with the reign of youth-ism, comes a disrespect for older generations. Instead of thinking “this person is older and probably has something to teach me that I don't know yet” we figure “this person is old and out of date and funny looking and weak and is best ignored.” Older folks deserve better, especially Mom and Dad. Even into old age we must honor our parents. We should visit them, listen to their advice, and see they are well cared for later in life. Honor for parents has not statute of limitations.

There is a long tradition of interpreting the fifth commandment as speaking more broadly to all positions of authority. To cite just one example, all the catechisms and confessions of the Reformation treated the command to honor father and mother as applicable to other “authority-subordinate” relationships. There is some precedence for this extension in the Old Testament: tribal heads could be called fathers (Gen. 10:21). Abraham was the father of many nations (Gen. 17:4); the distinction between elders, fathers, and leaders was more fluid than rigid; the King is called a father (1 Sam. 24:12); Naaman's servant called their military leader “father” (2 Kings 5:12); Abimelech (a familiar name in Israel and a kingly title in surrounding nations) meant “father is king”; Deborah was called a mother in Israel (Judg. 5:7)—all of these examples suggesting that “father” and “mother” was not just a familial term, but used in broader contexts of authority.

Moreover, we see clearly from the rest of Scripture that we should honor those to whom honor is due: slaves to masters (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ” [Eph. 6:5]); wives to husbands (“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” [Eph. 5:22]); the church to its leaders (“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” [Heb. 13:7]); younger men to older men (“Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders” [1 Peter 5:5]); and all of us to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1ff.)

As much as it grates against our American spirit, Scripture commands us to be submissive to rulers and authorities, be obedient, ready for every good work (Titus 3:1). No matter which party is in power, the command is the same: fear God; honor the king (1 Peter 2:17). Unfortunately, “civil political discourse” are three words that don't go together in the 21st century. Nevertheless, we must remember that our standard for honoring those in authority is higher than what we hear from Rush Limbaugh and Michael Moore. Scripture is full of examples of divinely frowned upon disrespect. David was cursed by Nabal (1 Sam. 25:10) and Shimei (2 Sam. 16:7). To them, David was a “rogue” or “bum.” And yet these are the words some of us use to describe our leaders all the time! We would do better to be like David toward Saul, who dared not lay a hand on God's anointed, though the king was a cowardly rascal. In a democracy we have freedom of speech and assembly and part of how we respect the governing authorities is by trying to change the governing authorities. There is nothing wrong with strong disagreement and working for change. But we must always honor those over us, with our prayers and our respect.

I doubt many of us regularly feel convicted by the fifth commandment. When we are kids we don't think of obedience to Mom and Dad as a spiritual issue. And when we are older and know better, we're out of the house and only see the 'rents at Christmas or for babysitting. So it's easy to think this is one commandment we've got pretty much nailed down. But 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 chairs, 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? Jesus was subject to his father and mother (Luke 2:51) when they were imperfect and he was perfect. So surely we can be subject to imperfection too and honor those granted by God to have authority over us.

~ written by Kevin DeYoung