

WORTHY OF HONOR

Scriptures: Matthew 15:1-9, Matthew 5:43-48

I once read a story by a family counselor at a Raleigh Hills Hospital in California. She was working with a family whose 49 year-old father was an alcoholic. The man's 13 year-old son, the youngest of his three children, told the counselor that he thought he was the only one in the family who knew his father had a drinking problem. One night his father came home drunk, and his son watched as he staggered in the door, fell on the floor, and begin throwing up. The son said, "Everyone acted as if it wasn't happening. My mom didn't talk about it, nor did my older sisters. I thought I was going crazy." When the counselor asked his mother and sisters why they never talked with the boy about the incident, they said, "We didn't want to bring it up in case he hadn't noticed" (*Alcoholism*, Jan.-Feb., 1981).

The Bible tells us to "Honor your father and mother," but what does that mean in a case like this 49 year-old alcoholic? I know this is an extreme example, but the truth is that all parents have problems. I once told my children that when they were grown I would write an account of their parents' neuroses and send it to a counselor of their choice to save them time. All parents have problems. The Bible recognizes that as well as anyone. There are enough dysfunctional parents in the Bible to fill the caseloads of a dozen psychologists. So what does the Bible mean when it says, "Honor your father and mother"?

To understand this commandment you must realize something: This commandment is not primarily directed at young children and adolescents. It is directed primarily at adults, and it concerns the relationship of adults to their elderly parents. That's why it uses the word "honor" rather than "obey."

Certainly children and teenagers are expected to obey their parents. That command is explicitly stated elsewhere in the Bible. Children and teenagers, the command to honor your father and mother includes obeying them. I know that isn't always fun, it isn't always convenient, and it isn't always fair. At your stage of life that is part of what it means to follow Jesus. Now there may be rare cases when you should not obey your parents or go along with what they want you to do, like if your parents ask you to do something that you know is wrong. I'm not talking about something you don't like, something inconvenient or unpleasant that you need to do. I am talking about something that you know is wrong for an adult to do or wrong for an adult to ask you to do. If that happens, you should talk to another adult whom you trust to help you figure out how to respond.

But this commandment is not primarily aimed at children and teenagers. It is primarily aimed at adults who are commanded to honor their now elderly parents, the parents who may no longer be able to earn their own living or provide for themselves. Notice how this commandment is worded in Exodus 20. It says, "Honor your father and your mother, so that you days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." There is a subtle reminder here that if you live long enough, you too will need to be honored, you too will need to be supported and cared for by the younger generation. Remember that when you are dealing with your own elderly parents.

As you probably realize, there were no pensions or social security in ancient Israel. A person's social security was children who could take over the family land or the family business. That is why the Bible shows such great concern for childless widows, even to the extent of requiring their husband's brother to marry them and provide them with children. Care of the elderly was a critical concern of the Old Testament, and children played an important part in that care.

Apparently, however, children sometimes tried to avoid that responsibility. An example is our second scripture lesson. In Jesus' time a child could avoid having to support his parents by donating his property to God as an offering. We are not exactly sure how this worked, but it may be that the property was donated to the temple while the children continued to live on it and farm it—sort of an ancient deferred giving program. The problem was that such an arrangement left nothing for the support of elderly parents.

Jesus condemned this practice as a violation of the fifth commandment. Yes, we have a duty to serve God and give offerings to God. But we also have a responsibility to people, especially elderly parents who may no longer be able to care for themselves.

One of the ways we do this today is through Social Security. Money is taken out of the paychecks of people who work so that those no longer able to work can be supported and have medical care. Whether this should be done by a government program or by privatized Social Security accounts is something that economists and politicians can debate. But the Bible is clear, especially here in the fifth commandment, that we have a religious responsibility to the elderly, the disabled, the widow or widower, the poor, and everyone who can no longer care for themselves. In God's eyes we are judged not by how rich we are, not by how powerful we are, but by how compassionate we are to people who no longer have the power, ability, or resources to provide for themselves.

But what does this commandment mean on a more personal level? How much does God expect children to do for their elderly parents? Should we be caring for elderly parents in our home or in their home? Should we as children assume all responsibility for their health, their finances, their transportation, their nutrition, or their activities of daily living? The fifth commandment does not try to sort that out. But on this point I think it is helpful to remember the advice of the airlines: In case of a loss of cabin pressure, put on your own oxygen mask first, then assist those around you. The first time I heard that I thought, "That sure is self-centered. Aren't we as Christians supposed to put other people first? Shouldn't we be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others?" But the airlines have figured something out. They have learned that if parents try to put the oxygen mask on their children first, which is your natural instinct as a parent, then the parent may pass out from lack of oxygen before finishing the task. Then your children, who may or may not be able to put the mask on themselves, would be in jeopardy.

I think something similar applies to adults caring for elderly parents. Sometimes you need to put on your own mask first. You need to watch out for your own physical, emotional, and spiritual well being before you can help an elderly parent, or an elderly spouse. You must do this, not because you are selfish but because it is necessary to preserve yourself as a caregiver. That is not dishonoring parents; it is caring for them in the most faithful way possible.

But here is the really interesting things about the fifth commandment: The fifth commandment says nothing about the parents' worthiness of honor. As I said at the beginning, the Bible is not naïve. The Bible is quite aware that some parents are good and some are not. Actually, most parents are a mixture of the two. They have some qualities that we admire and some that drive us crazy. The Bible never assumes that all parents are worthy of honor. It simply tells us to honor them anyway.

Here, I think, is the deepest meaning of this commandment. God wants us to honor our parents, not because they are always worthy of honor, but because in honoring them we demonstrate what God's grace is about. Maybe you had good parents and maybe you didn't, but in either case your ability to show them grace is the key to experiencing grace for yourself. That is the point Jesus made in our first scripture lesson. We have a Father in heaven who sends the sunrise on the evil and on the good, who sends the rain on the just and the unjust. And if God is so gracious to us, we must learn to be gracious to others, even to our parents, especially if they are at a point in their lives where they are vulnerable, where the roles have switched and we are in the position of strength and they are in the position of weakness.

I once heard a story of two Boy Scouts who arrived at a troop meeting with their uniforms torn and their faces scratched. "What happened?" the Scoutmaster asked. The boys explained that they were trying to do a good deed by helping an elderly lady across the street. "So how did that result in this?" the Scoutmaster asked. "It happened," the scouts explained, "because she didn't want to go" (Thomas Gillespie, "On Making Other Plan," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Nov. 2003, p. 307).

When you honor your parents or anyone who is elderly, do it wisely and with grace.

- Ken Onstot
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