

Ten Rules for Life | Fifth Commandment: Honor Your Father and Mother | Exodus 20:12

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(Discussion questions on page 7)

Research in past decades into family life and parenting is vast. But a few common themes are discernable—two of which are these:

First, is a shift away from authority towards autonomy. The duty and obedience of children have been replaced by a focus on their rights and development; the honoring of elders replaced by the importance of individual fulfillment; formation towards an ideal replaced by space for psychological expression.

This shift emerged in the 1960s along with a general skepticism towards all expressions of authority: the state, institutions, media, the church—and the traditional family.

Author Annie Gottlieb lived through the 60s and concludes they were

the generation that destroyed the American family... We might not have been able to tear down the state, but the family was closer. We could get our hands on it.... We truly believed that the family had to be torn apart to free love.... And the first step was to tear ourselves free from our parents.¹

Modern entertainment rarely portrays parents as wise figures who lovingly lead their children. They're silly or ignorant old people who need to be enlightened by a younger generation.

Not every aspect of this shift is bad—it is good to attend to the unique needs of a child. But the results of prizing self-discovery and self-creation of youth has not led to sturdier adults.

A second theme has to do with the interplay between family and culture. Biblically, the family was meant to shape society. The ethos of the home was the foundation for the ethos of the state. Love, respect for authority, honor towards others, was learned at the dining room table. Family shaped culture.

The opposite is true today: culture shapes family. Schools, screens, child-development experts, policy, exert more influence on parents than parents do on them. Paula Fass, in her book *The End of American Childhood*, surveys parenting tendencies from the American frontier to modern day. She finds that in America the parent-child relationship increasingly tends to mirror national values.

Once again, culture—or the state—impacting the home is not all bad. Child labor laws in past centuries protect youth from abusive work environments; and no one wants to go back to the

¹ Gottlieb, Annie. *Do You Believe in Magic? Bringing the Sixties Back Home* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); cited in Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 601.

time when Roman fathers of the ancient world could beat their children or sell them into servitude with impunity.²

But this shift can result in the culture having more parental influence than the parent.

Parenting has never been easy. Most parents are trying hard to do their best. And for the modern parent, the complexity of parenting in an age of incredible technological change—screens, phones, and AI—only makes things harder.

But shifts like these—from authority-based to autonomy-based home structure; from home shaping society to society shaping home—need to be weighed in light of biblical wisdom.

Into these challenges speaks the Fifth Commandment—with a word not at first to parents, but to children: “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12).

As we’ll see, this commandment and its implications are filled with wisdom for children and parents of all ages. It also has something to say about the relationship of the home to society. We’ll consider three implications arising from this Commandment: **(1) Children, Show Honor; (2) Parents, Steward Authority; (3) Everyone, Respect Order.**

I. Children, Show Honor: “Honor your father and mother” (Exod 20:12a).

The Tone of Honor:³

The commandment centers on the word, “honor.” The relationship between children toward parent is to be one of honor. What does honor entail?

Respect: The term translated “honor” is the verbal form of the noun, “glory.” Here, it means to convey respect. This is more than cool obedience. Honor is an attitude, and posture, toward parents that shows reverence and deference. And even before the parent does anything, this is rooted in the mere fact of their seniority: “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (Lev 19:32).

The Bible calls for a culture of honor, whereby the young honor the old.

Obedience: Honor does also include obedience: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). The question may arise, “what about instances where a parent tells a child to do something against God’s will, or against the law?” We come to this in a moment. But the default posture is to be one of trust and obedience, not rebellion: “A fool despises his father’s instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent” (Prov. 15:5)

² “But if the nation values individualism, and individualism is about self-discovery and self-creation, then the goal of parenting is this: to help each child find their true self, rather than to guide them into a pre-determined vision of being an upstanding man or woman.”

³ John Calvin says that honor requires three things: “reverence, obedience, and gratitude.”

Care: It is likely that one of the main impulses for this command for Israel was to ensure that adult children cared for aging parents. In an ancient nomadic culture, there was no state-run safety net for the vulnerable.

Sometimes this care may mean bearing with parents in their failings. Not making peace with their failings but doing what we can to honor them despite these. A sad failure of this was Ham, the son of Noah. Noah had an episode of excessive drinking and passed out naked in his tent—an embarrassment for sure. When Ham sees, rather than covering his father and protecting his honor, he fetches his brothers to come and see—to mock his father. The other two know better and cover their father with a blanket (Gen 9:20-24).

Gratitude: And honor means being grateful. We do not remember all the meals, diaper changes, sleepless nights, fears and prayers, that went into our early years. We often do not understand the financial sacrifices. The next generation owes a debt to those who have come before in so many ways—let us not fall prey to a spirit of entitlement that seems so prevalent today.

The Scope of Honor—It extends, in degree, to parents good or bad:

It may be easy to honor good parents. But what about parents who fail us—or worse, abuse and harm us?

The Bible does not call us to celebrate and paint over wrongdoing. However, there is a type of honor that can be shown toward any parent—from the best to the worst. This is crucial to see, as it protects us from harboring bitterness and hate.

There is an honor due all parents simply because **they are human beings created** in the image of God: James laments that with our tongue **“we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God”** (James 3:9). There is a humanness, even in our worst of criminals, that we respect. This is why we don’t shoot our worst criminals like a lame animal; we give them a fair trial—we honor their humanity. In this sense, children honor their parent even if a total failure.

And there is an honor rooted in **grace**, not merit. Paul speaks of this when he refers to Jesus’ incarnation and death for sinners as a model for how we treat each other. He says to Christians, **“in humility count others more significant than yourselves”** (Phil 2:3).

No parent is perfect. And wounds from a parent are some of the deepest. And each child must learn, as they get older, what it means, ultimately, to be parented by God—their heavenly Father.

But the commandment stands for all of us—no matter how great or bad our parents are—**“Honor your father and mother.”**

The application of honor changes over time:

And this honor has its changes in application over time: Obedience changes to respectful listening as we become adults. Receiving care from parents transforms into caring for them at some point. Relying on our prayers for us, shifts to us praying for them.

But across all our lives, God commands us: “honor your father and mother” (Exod 20:12).

Apply: A word of application to the young people in the room. Do you long for a better society? Do you lament the evils you see in the world around you? Do you know that the beginning of the solution to them involves how you treat your mother and father? Are you, who demand justice and honor in the streets, showing honor and respect and obedience to your parents? Healthy citizenship begins in the home.

Let’s turn now to ask about how this command impacts parents.

II. Parents, Steward Authority: “Fathers, do not provoke your children but bring them up...in the Lord” (Eph 6:4).

Though the fifth commandment does not address parents directly, it assumes certain qualities and duties of those entrusted with the care of others. Especially those who have God-given authority over others. Parents are to *steward their God-given authority* in specific ways.

This means an overall atmosphere where authority is exercised in a way that is pleasing to the Lord—not in lording it over others, but to nurture their good.

We see this in the description of an Israelite king:

When he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law.... it shall be with him...that he may learn to fear the LORD... ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers” (Deut 17:18-20)

The law of God was to keep even the king from believing he was, by nature, above those under his care—“that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers” (Deut 17:20).

Paul applies this principle of God-honoring authority to the parent-child relationship in Ephesians 4, where he cites this commandment:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph 6:1-4).

To “provoke” is to unnecessarily incite to anger or fear. This was an especially pertinent word in the Roman world, where fathers had total rights over their children and could beat them or sell them into servitude with impunity.

Our culture is skeptical toward most authority. There are reasons for this—abuses of authority exact horrible damage. But the answer to these is not the denial of all God-given authority, but the right stewardship of it.

Scripture reshapes the nature of authority away from *selfish rule* toward *God-fearing stewardship*. The responsibility of the parent (or king, or government official, or teacher, or coach) is to selflessly work for the flourishing of those under their care. And when stewarded in the fear of the Lord, authority is a good gift.

In his final words, recorded in 2 Samuel, king David says,

When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, ⁴ he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2 Samuel 2:23:3-4).

Apply: Parents, steward your God-ordained authority over your children in the *fear of God*—do not provoke your children, but, as Paul goes on, **but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord**. (Eph 6:1-4). Parents are not to punish in harshness but in love; not to rule arbitrarily or treat children as mere property. They are to discipline with structure and for the sake of godly correction; they are to instruct for moral formation; and they are to do all “in the Lord,” meaning, in love for God and the child.

The Anglican Catechism ask of the fifth commandment: “What responsibilities accompany authority under this commandment?” It answers, “Those in authority are called to exercise it justly, lovingly, and in ways that reflect God’s care and righteousness.”

The Bible also stresses that duty of parents to raise their children up to know God.

The Lord says, as recorded in Deuteronomy 6,

These words that I command you today ... You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deut 6:6-7).

Parents are to tell their children about the salvation of God

When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ ²¹ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes” (Deut 6:20-22).

For the Christian, this means telling your children about how God saved you.

A final implication from the fifth commandment, which has to do with how this command impacts all of society, and applies equally to all of us: *Everyone, respect order*.

III. Everyone, respect order: “...that it may go well with you in the land” (Exod 20:12b).

As the 1st commandment (no gods before God) orders for first tablet; so too, the 5th (honor father and mother) orders the second tablet: the order of society begins in the home. The home is where we learn to respect those in authority over us; the home is where we learn charity; the home is where we learn to patiently bear with one another in love. The parental relationship is the first and most important relationship. It shapes all others. And therefore, this relationship impacts the culture around us, as Kevin DeYoung notes,

Civilizations, societies, cultures, and countries do not flourish apart from social order, trust, and mutual respect. All of that is meant to be taught and imbibed in the incubator

of the family. It's not too much to say that loving your neighbor begins with listening to Mom and Dad.⁴

Augustine said, "If Anyone fails to honor his parents, is there anyone else he will spare?"

The nature of this commandment, then, extends from how we honor parents to how we honor teachers, civil leaders, and church leaders.

Paul says of our relation to the state:

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 (Rom 13:1).

Paul says of our attitude toward church leaders:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim 5:17).

Peter adds, honor everyone:

Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:17).

This is not only because it is right and pleasing to God. But it is because it is key to the flourishing of life around us. Hence the promise annexed to this commandment:

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

"What promise is attached to the Fifth Commandment, asks the catechism? It answers, "God promises blessing and stability to those who honor rightful authority, as they live within his covenant order."

Without the honoring of order, a society descends into disorder and chaos. This does not mean people never seek to amend a society perpetuating harmful order, or seek reform where reform is needed.

But it does mean we must filter through and ultimately resist the spirit of *deconstruction* that seems to be running rampant through our world. Here is a spirit where there is no honor shown to the order and structure that has been given us through the centuries, and often assumes all order is inherently bad. There is a place for critique—a long and robust tradition within Christianity for *reform* that stretches from the church to society. But the attitude of the heart is first to honor.

Consider the balance of our Lord. He critiques the culture of prideful authority in Rome, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them" (Mark 10:42). But at the same time, honors the basic order of things: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt 22:21).

⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *Ten Commandments*, 81.

What does the Fifth Commandment teach us? It teaches us that a culture of honor is better than one of entitlement. That parental authority is not harmful but must be exercised in the fear of the Lord for the sake of blessing children. And in casting an eye to the larger society, it teaches us that the health of a nation often begins at the dinner table.

And from what source does the 5th commandment derive, ultimately? From the very heart and nature of the Triune God: In the economy of the Trinity, it has always been true that the child honors the father—God the Son honors God the Father. It has always been true, the God the Father delights in God the Son.

For we humans, created in the image of this God, the fifth commandment strikes at the very nature of things:

“Honor your father and mother” (Exod 20:12).

Let’s pray.

Small group questions | 5th commandment

1. Where do you notice this tensions between honoring authority and valuing personal freedom in our culture today? How about in your own life? How does the 5th Commandment—“Honor your father and mother” (Ex 20:12)—challenge or reshape your thoughts and instincts in this area?
2. Honor involves respect, obedience (within bounds), care and gratitude. Which of these has been the hardest for you to show to your parents? Why? In your current season of life—child, adult child, parent, etc.) what might honor look like?
3. What authority do you hold—as a parent, manager, teacher, coach etc.? What does it look like to exercise—not shirk—this authority in a way that nurtures others rather than provoking or minimizing them?
4. Consider the relationship between the family and culture. Which should have a bigger impact on forming children and why? How can Christian families intentionally cultivate a culture of honor in a world that resists it?