

# 5th Commandment

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     A few weeks ago we heard how our Prime Minister, David Cameron, wants to spend, I can't remember the figures, but millions of pounds or a very large sum of money to find out what makes us happy or sad. And he's concerned about the happiness of the nation. Well, I share that concern. I think it's a very healthy one. I'm not sure if paying consultants will help him find the answer or not, but I wish him well in the concern that he has. I wonder what do you consider as the principal cause of sadness in our country? Why is it, I wonder, that over the last 50 years we have got richer and richer as a nation, notwithstanding a little hiccup in the last couple of years, but even with that today we are so much wealthier, immeasurably wealthier than we were a generation ago. Why is it that as we have materially prospered, why is it that in parallel our society is more and more fractured and broken and, yes, sad? Something at the heart of the nation would seem to be awry.

What is it? Well, different answers are suggested and no doubt there are a number of answers that together would help us understand what is going on. But I would suggest that few could reasonably deny, some might deny, but I think few could reasonably deny that the breakdown of the family constitutes a crisis at the very roots of our society and perhaps in great measure would explain why we are where we are.

Now, this is not as it should be. It is not as God would have it be. God's deep concern is for our good, good for our happiness. The very commandments that He has given us. As we've noted on more than one occasion, He explains that the reason He has given us these commandments is that it might go well with us, that we would be blessed, that we would enjoy shalom, this general well-being that is His purpose for us.

We will enjoy that in the measure that we are wise in keeping, of course, the commandments that He has given us for that purpose. As we think then of where the family fits into these purposes of God and this purpose of God that we be blessed, that we enjoy this well-being that He would have us enjoy, that is evidence that we are in the very commandments that the family does indeed lie at the heart of these purposes, evidence, if evidence is required, in the very commandments. For we find that of the Ten Commandments, two very explicitly relate to this matter of the family. The one we're going to consider this evening, honor your father and your mother, and then of course the seventh commandment is also the seventh commandment concerning marital faithfulness. Both of them very clearly and very explicitly dealing with the family and the relationships that there are within our families.

So that fact alone, along with so many other evidences, if you wish, it places the family at the very heart of God's God's purposes for us. Well, as I say, this evening we're concerned with the fifth commandment. We find it there in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 12, and we'll read the verse, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Honor your father and your mother. Let's think about this commandment and we're going to do so in the following way. We're going to consider briefly what it assumes, what God, as it were, takes as a given in placing upon sons and daughters this particular duty. So what does the commandment assume? But then what is, we could say, the most central aspect of what we need to think about is, what does it require? What is involved in obeying this commandment, in honoring our father and our mother? And then as we close, notice what it promises. This is, as we read in

[ 5 : 15 ] Ephesians, a commandment with a promise. And we want to briefly just comment on the promise that there is in this commandment. First of all then, what does this commandment assume? And we won't dwell on this, but it is worth noting that the commandment takes as a given that we are all to live and grow and participate in society as members of families. We are not autonomous individuals who are intended to live our own lives independently as we see fit. No, we have to. We are intended to relate to and be responsible to others, very particularly those of us as sons and daughters to our parents, and of course parents in turn to their children. This is taken as a given. The commandment simply assumes that this is the way it is. Nobody would have responded to this commandment and protested, well, what's all this about? It's simply assumed that that is so, that families lie at the heart of human society, and indeed the health of any given society will be directly proportional to the health of the families that make up that society. So families, per se, are a given, but we can go further. The commandment also takes as a given what is God's ideal composition of families, if we can put it in that language. The commandment makes it clear. It's only a very brief commandment, but it's very clear what God takes as a given that a family will look like. And what is God's ideal? Well, there's a father, there's a mother, and there are children, sons and daughters. Few or many, but that's the family. It's simply, as I say, assumed in the commandment. God doesn't need to say, well, this is the way it is. It's simply a given that this is what a family will look like. The basic unit, then, is clear. A father, a mother, and the children that God is pleased to grant to the parents. Now, at this point, some might say, well, tell me something I don't know. It's so obvious what is said thus far. And yet, I think we're all aware, and we would say tragically and perversely, that we live in a day where this definition of family is aggressively challenged. Families, we are told, come in all different shapes and sizes. And how are we to respond to that challenge? Well, the very first thing that we must do, and I would be very keen to state right up front as we consider this matter of what a family looks like. The very first response is that we do recognize. We recognize that there are circumstances, often sad and tragic circumstances, that lead to many, many families not conforming to that ideal, if we can use that language.

We know that death can deprive a family of mother or father. Marriages break up. That's the way it is. We can lament that, but we recognize that it is so, and so many different reasons for that. We know that when that happens, sometimes both mother and father, husband and wife, are responsible. They share responsibility. There are other times when there are innocent victims. We know that that is so.

Husbands are unfaithful. Wives are unfaithful. We know that that is the way it is. And as a result of these things, as a result of these sad circumstances, there are families made up of mom and the children, of dad and the children, of granny and the children, of foster parents and the children.

We know also that there are times and circumstances where God chooses not to grant the gift of children to parents. And that can be very painful and sad for parents. But we recognize that that is so. And so you can have a family where there are no children. All of these things we are willing, of course, and gladly to recognize as so. And we say more than that. We recognize that God is good, and that such families can be happy and God-honoring families. Where there isn't mom and dad and children, where the composition of the family is different to the ideal, if you wish, that is simply assumed, even in this commandment, father, mother and children. We don't know for sure, but it would seem that Jesus was part of a family where dad prematurely died and was no longer part of that family. We don't know that for sure, but certainly it would appear to have been the case. And possibly, in the case of Jesus, he may have been a grown man when that happened, but he had several brothers, and maybe there were in that family younger children deprived at an early age of the father that they loved and that they needed. So we readily recognize this reality. However, while we recognize that, it is quite another thing to then accept that there is no ideal, that anything goes, that any shape or size of family is equally valid. That is a huge jump from recognizing that there are occasions when families look different, to then say that any composition is valid.

We don't accept, for example, that where a couple have a child and yet do so with no intention of living together as parents, that the resulting family is equally ideal in its composition. Now, the outcome of that, of course, is that the mother or the father or social services or somebody else or the extended family will have to come on board.

[ 11 : 59 ] And with all the consequences of that, and we accept, well, yes, that happens, but we don't for a moment say, well, that's a good thing, or that's equally valid, that's equally illegitimate. Nor do we accept that given the ideal that God presents us, that a situation where a homosexual couple choose to adopt children, that that is an equally valid shape that a family can take. We don't accept that that is a legitimate conclusion, even though we recognize that even stating that will have us deemed to be intolerant and homophobic and all other kinds of adjectives that will be thrown in our direction. God is very clear.

In a family, sons and daughters owe honor to a man and a woman, to father and mother, to their parents.

These things are assumed in the commandment. But we move on to think about what the commandment actually requires. Now, this requirement is placed upon the sons and daughters. And if anybody thinks that they are off the hook in considering this commandment, well, we're all sons and daughters.

Not only children, but even as we grow into adulthood, we remain as sons and daughters. So, all of us have this commandment enjoined upon us. The requirements of it apply to us. But what is required?

What is required by the language that is used of honor your father and your mother? I think we can identify three related requirements, and we consider each in turn. The requirement to honor father and mother involves the duty of respect to our parents. It involves the need to obey our parents, and involves thirdly the responsibility to care for our parents. These three elements I think we can identify and together constitute what is involved in honoring, respecting, obeying, and caring for. Let's just think of each briefly in turn. First of all, respect. The respect that is due to father and mother. This has to do with the manner of how we relate to our parents. The recognition that we give to them as those who have authority over us.

[ 14 : 51 ] The measure of that respect can be seen in how children, big or small, speak to and listen to their parents. There's one way in which we can determine whether this respect is being given as it ought to be.

Do children speak to father, to mother, to mom, to dad, courteously and respectfully? Do they listen attentively and politely? These are not simply cultural norms. These aren't simply what we might say good manners, though they are. They are involved in obedience to this commandment. To honor father and mother mother is to respect father and mother. Sometimes the language is used in connection with families of earning respect. Indeed, we speak of that in other relationships. We're told that we need to earn somebody's respect. Do parents need to earn the respect of their children? We could ask the question.

In a fundamental sense, we would say no. They don't need to earn the respect of their children because intrinsically they are due the respect of their children. Now, while I say that, and I think that is clearly what the Scriptures teach, that is not to say that parents would not be very wise to deal with their children in such a way as to make respecting them an easy thing. It would be a foolish parent who would say, well, I am due the respect of my children. The Bible says so. God is so ordained that you must respect me, and so I will be a tyrant and yet be unconcerned as to whether you appreciate that or are hurt by that because you owe me respect. It is true that children owe respect to their parents. Parents are due that respect.

But a wise parent will do all that they can to make the giving of respect not a painful or burdensome thing, but a simple and an easy one. That surely is behind a little of what Paul is saying in Ephesians. We've read in Ephesians, and if we just notice something that Paul says there in verse 4, fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Don't make it difficult for them to obey you. Don't make it difficult for them to respect you. Yes, they owe you respect. They owe you obedience, but don't you put obstacles in the way. So, this honoring of father and mother involves respecting our parents. And no doubt that could be developed in many directions, but we leave it there. The second element or the second aspect that I'm suggesting is that honoring involves obedience.

To honor mother and father, father and mother, involves obedience. Now, again, Paul in Ephesians makes the connection between honor and obedience explicit. We might say that it's obvious or it's evident, but Paul goes beyond just assuming it to actually stating it very explicitly. We've read the passage, but let's just notice again there in Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 1, children, obey your parents and the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and your mother, which is the first commandment, with a promise. And he goes on. I don't think Paul there is saying that there are two things you need to do. You need to obey and you need to honor. Rather, he is saying that children owe their parents' obedience. Why? Well, because God commands children that they should honor their parents. And to honor your parents' parents involves obeying them. Indeed, Paul makes this demand of obedience more inclusive and more difficult, we might say, when he touches on the same matter in his letter to the church at

[19:10] Colossae. In Colossians chapter 3 and verse 20, we can just notice briefly what he says there on this same matter. Colossians chapter 3 and verse 20, children, obey your parents in everything.

Seems very extreme, doesn't it? I'm sure any of the children who are still listening might think that's just a bit too far. But that's what it says, children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Let's just think about that a little bit. Are children to obey their parents always, in every situation, in every circumstance? What happens when the parent makes a demand on the child that is unreasonable? Is the child still obliged to obey? And we say yes. Yes, even when the parent makes a demand that is unreasonable. Of course, a parent shouldn't do that. It's a very cruel thing to make unreasonable demands. But even when a parent does, perhaps by mistake, perhaps without thinking, we are fallible. We do make mistakes. Can a child say, well, it's an unreasonable demand, so I won't obey? No. Paul is clear in everything. Children are to obey their parents. What about when a demand is unfair? Maybe a parent is showing some kind of preference between one son and another son. And maybe one is being told to do the chores in the house much more than the other. And it really is unfair. What is being asked of one of the children is unfair. Does that give the child the right to say, no, I'm not going to do it? No, it doesn't. The child has to obey. The child is under an obligation to obey their parents, even when the parents are unreasonable. Now, again, let me stress, I'm not for a moment encouraging that parents be unreasonable. It's a terrible thing and a very solemn thing as parents to be unfair, to be unreasonable.

But the demand remains one that applies to children, that they are to obey their parents. Maybe a child thinks that they know better when the father says, do this or do that or don't do this or do that.

I know better. Do you still have an obligation to obey? Yes, you do. Now, that said, we do recognize that there are situations where this requirement to obey is modified, we might say, or even suspended.

And there's two circumstances that we could highlight in this regard. The first is a natural one, if that's the language we could use. And the other is a lamentable one. First of all, a natural circumstance where this demand of obedience is modified, or if you wish, evolves into something different. And here I'm simply referring to where a son or a daughter, following the biblical injunctive, leaves his father and mother. To use the language of Genesis, where a son leaves his father and mother, and he is united to his wife. But a daughter leaves his father and mother and is united to her husband. When that happens, clearly there is a change in the relationship. It's not that the son or daughter is no longer bound by the commandment.

[ 22 : 44 ] No, they remain, we remain bound by the commandment. But the manner in which we will obey the commandment does change. The obedience that we will render to our parents changes. We are part of a new family unit, as it were. Not freed from the duty to honor, or indeed to obey. But the manner of that obedience does change. And we don't have time here to develop how that might work. Another thing that I would just notice in, if you wish, qualifying this demand of obeying in everything, would be to recognize that, as is in our relationship with the state and with the authorities, the requirement to obey our parents does not take us to the point where we must do so if they would require us to do something that God forbids. If God forbids something, and a parent very foolishly and blasphemously would ask a child to do something that God forbids, then there the child, though a very difficult situation has to be said for a child, would be within his rights, as it were, to say, well that I cannot do, for that is something that God forbids. To use the language that John Calvin uses in this regard, if a father enjoins anything unrighteous, obedience is freely to be denied him. To honor our parents, the requirement of this commandment involves respect, it involves obedience, and these things are modeled for us by Jesus. Time doesn't allow us to develop at any length, but we know the passages where we're told about his respect for and obedience to his parents. We can just read what we find there in Luke chapter 2 and verse 51, and without any commentary, we can simply in the reading of it see how in Jesus we have an example of this respect and obedience. We know the occasion when Jesus was at the temple, and when his parents eventually find him, we read there at the close of the chapter, then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.

But his mother treasured all these things in her heart, and Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men, that of course including his parents and brothers and sisters and all in his family circle. Before we move on to just say the other aspect of what the commandment requires, it is maybe worth pointing out that in this matter of obedience, while the commandment clearly is a commandment that requires a response from sons and daughters, children, and indeed as we grow older, there is also a responsibility upon parents, particularly in this matter of obedience, and that is the duty of parents to secure the obedience of their children. We are all rebels by nature. We don't like obeying. None of us like obeying. Consequently, this is very difficult for children. It's difficult to obey, because our natural inclination is not to obey, it's to do our own thing. And so while it is true that children are under a God-given obligation to obey, there is also a duty upon parents to ensure the obedience of their children. And if children are not obeying, then parents have a responsibility to secure that obedience, not in a tyrannical way, certainly not abusing of their children, but by, in the manner of their parenting, in the discipline that they apply, ensuring that children do obey, that they do indeed obey the commandment in the obedience they grant to their parents.

Moving on to the third aspect then of what the commandment requires, very briefly, and that is that we are to care for our parents. Of course, this introduces an important truth, something we've already commented, that the commandment is not just directed to children, or to teenagers, or to those who are still under the responsibility of their parents.

We never grow out of the demand of this commandment. And to honor involves, particularly when our parents are older and aged, perhaps unable to provide for themselves, the honor involves caring for parents in old age. That might involve material provision. In our own society, that is less of an issue, as the very wealth that we enjoy sometimes will allow us to secure ourselves as far as our material needs are concerned. It's not always the case, but often is. But it could involve material provision, catering for physical needs, certainly emotional and social needs. These are manners in which we must care for our parents, and so honor this commandment. Again, Jesus serves as our example.

He serves as an example in the teaching that He gives. You remember how He criticized the hypocrisy of those who identified money that they had as being dedicated for some religious purpose, the word *korban*.

[ 28 : 22 ] And it was simply as an excuse not to provide for the needs of their parents. And they are very strongly condemned by Jesus for that. But perhaps much more powerfully is the very example of Jesus there at Calvary, as He is hanging on Calvary's tree, and He cares for, He provides for Mary. We know the scene very well as He commends His mother to the care of John. There, very vividly, very dramatically, very movingly, we find Jesus obeying this commandment of honoring His mother, even while He is suffering such a terrible and cruel death. So, to honor our parents, the requirement of this commandment to respect, to obey, to care for. And who can say, well, I have kept this commandment? Who can say, I have never broken this commandment? None of us. We have all broken the commandment.

What to do when we recognize that we are lawbreakers? Well, we thought of at the very beginning of our consideration of the commandments. One of the purposes of the commandments is to help us to see that we are indeed incapable of keeping them, that we are lawbreakers, but that in the gospel a way has been provided for lawbreakers. Forgiveness is available. Indeed, the very Jesus, who as He hung on Calvary's tree, provided for His mother, in that very death He makes provision that there might be forgiveness for us who break this commandment as we do all the others in so many ways. Finally, what does this commandment promise? Well, we have the language of Exodus there that we've read, honor your father and your mother, and then it goes on to say, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Now, this promise can be understood at different levels. At one level, I think it is reasonable to understand it in some measure as a promise to Israel as a nation. There is this reference to the land, this territorial gift that

God had promised and was now giving to the people of Israel. They were just about to take possession of the land. And so God is saying, as it were, to the nation of Israel, if you as a nation keep this commandment, then you will prosper. You will indeed occupy the land, and you will indeed keep the land.

You will secure the land if you are faithful in keeping this promise, rather this commandment, and indeed the others that go with it. But there is, of course, also an individual or a personal aspect.

Indeed, the language there, so that you may live long, is in the singular form. It is addressed very personally to all who would hear the commandment, to all who would read it. It is addressed to me, it is addressed to you, personally and individually also. And what is the promise? Is it simply a promise to reach a right old age? Well, in Deuteronomy, where we have the commandments restated, this is developed a little, and it is from Deuteronomy that Paul picks up in Ephesians. And there is a broadening of the promise, not simply of long life, but we have this language that it would go well with you.

[ 31 : 57 ] That's really where we began, that God's purpose is for us, is that it would go well with us, that we would enjoy blessed lives, that there would be well-being in our families. And so God is saying, if you keep the commandment, then you will enjoy that well-being. It will go well with you. A general principle is being stated here, that the reward, if you wish, the result, if you wish, of obedience, is that it would go well with us. I don't think it need be, nor could be, reasonably understood as a rigid statement of cause and effect. We know that there are sons and daughters who are very careful in honoring their parents, and yet die young. And equally we know of sons and daughters who take no concern for keeping this commandment, and they live to a ripe old age. And so it's not to be understood as a rigid cause and effect that is being stated. Rather, there is a general principle that is stated in the form of this promise. Well, let's draw things to a close.

Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. We know the commandment. Let us keep the commandment. And let's keep the commandment, not only because there is blessing in so doing, even as the commandment states, but also let us keep the commandment as an opportunity to model God's purposes in this society where He has placed us. At the beginning we suggested that there is indeed a crisis in this matter of the family. What do we do about it? Do we simply point the finger? Do we simply lament and say, well, don't we live in terrible days? Or do we say, no, here we have an opportunity, by God's grace, to model in our neighborhoods, in our society, what God's good purpose is for family life. And that God would help us so to model God's intentions. We will make many mistakes. We will fall very far short. But by God's grace and with His help, may we model God's good and gracious purposes for us as members of families. Well, let's pray.