

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session VI

The Fifth Commandment

“Honor your father and your mother...” (Exodus 20:12 = Deuteronomy 5:16)

I. The Old Testament Meaning

1. It is rather unlikely that this commandment is addressed to children and is, thus, to be understood as a command for children to be obedient to their parents. One reason for this that in the Old Testament in general those addressed are the adult male members of the community. This does not mean that obedience to parents by children was simply overlooked. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 provides that a “rebellious son” (a son consistently disobedient to parents) is to be stoned to death by the men of his village.

2. The fifth commandment is best interpreted in the light of the fourth. Just as the fourth commandment provides for rest and refreshment for people and animals on the Sabbath, the fifth commandment has to do with the care of elderly parents when they have become too aged to work. Thus, Walter Harrelson argues that this commandment “focused on the treatment of aged parents by the more mature members of the community. Just as human beings and farm animals need rest from their labors, and just as grinding toil does not constitute the only reason for human life and activity, so also human beings do not cease to have worth and significance when the time for the productive working years has run its course. Parents are to be respected and cared for in their time of feebleness, diminished activity or senility.”

3. The fifth commandment also needs to be interpreted in the light of Exodus 21:15 (which mandates that the striking of a parent by a child is a capital crime) and Exodus 21:17 (which mandates that the cursing of a parent by a child is a capital crime). In both cases what is in view is the treating of a parent as if he or she were of no account. The situation addressed by the fifth commandment is another form of treating parents as if they were of no account—having grown frail and unable to support themselves, one simply discharges oneself of the responsibility to care for them.

4. Read in light of the fourth commandment, the fifth establishes an important principle: Human life, in this case the human life of elderly people, has an inherent value that goes beyond its commercial or economic value.

5. But the fifth commandment may have an even deeper intention. By mandating respect for elderly parents, it recognizes that one must respect the gift of life. The adult who has little respect for the source of life can easily fall into contempt for the life which is dependent upon him or her.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

(1) Aquinas understands this commandment to highlight the unique relationship between parent and child. Parents give three things to their children: the gift of life itself, nourishment and support for life and instruction.

(2) Because children have received these things from their parents they owe their parents honor. Because parents have supported children in life, children owe support to their parents. Aquinas cites Ecclesiasticus 3:12-13: "O son, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if he is lacking in understanding, show forbearance; in all your strength do not despise him."

(3) Aquinas does not understand the obedience owed to parents to be absolute or unqualified. Citing Luke 14: 26 ("If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother...he cannot be my disciple.") he notes that God is our truest father. Parental authority reaches its limit when it is contrary to God.

(4) Aquinas also notes that the fifth commandment is followed by "that your days may be long in the land..." (Exodus 20:12). For Aquinas this means that the honoring of parents is not simply a natural obligation but is part of obedience to God. He cites Ecclesiasticus 3:8: "Honor your father by word and deed, that a blessing from him may come upon you." Adopting the principle that the one who is faithful in little is faithful in much (Luke 16:10), Aquinas says "if you do not acknowledge the blessing of the natural life which you owe to your parents, then you are unworthy of the life of grace, which is greater, and all the more so for the life of glory, which is the greatest of all blessings."

III. John Calvin

(1) Calvin sees this commandment as part of the "economy of authority" and that it means that "we should look up to those whom God has placed over us, and should treat them with honor, obedience, and gratefulness. It follows from this that we are forbidden to detract from their dignity either by contempt, by stubbornness, or by ungratefulness" (*Institutes*, II.viii.35). But Calvin does not see subjection to parents as an end in itself. Rather, he notes that subjection per se conflicts with our sinful nature and that it is God's intention to use subjection to parents as a way of training us for all forms of proper subjection.

(2) Citing Deuteronomy 21:18-21, Calvin notes that God "has expressly bidden us to reverence our parents, who have brought us into life. 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" (*Institutes*, II.viii.36). Calvin does not think that this penalty should be carried out.

(3) Like Aquinas, Calvin does not think that parental authority is absolute, noting that Ephesians 6:1 instructs parents to "obey your parents in the Lord". Parental authority is not an end in itself since "the submission paid to them [parents] ought to be a step toward honoring that highest Father" (*Institutes*, II.viii.38). Because of this, "if they spur us to transgress the law, we have a perfect right to regard them not as parents, but as strangers, who are trying to lead us away from

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obedience...So we should act toward princes, lords, and every kind of superiors. It is unworthy and absurd for their eminence so to prevail as to pull down the loftiness of God" (*Institutes*, II.viii.38).

(4) Calvin is concerned to explicate what honor means here. It does not simply mean outward obedience or even affection: "Honor means much more. It means for children to follow the advice of their fathers and mothers, for them to let themselves be guided by them, to take the trouble to fulfill their duty to them; in brief, a child ought to understand that he is not at liberty with respect to his father and mother" (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Seven).

(5) Calvin sees this obedience as a school of charity in that "we see that charity begins by this end: that we should be humble and modest, and that no one should elevate himself in arrogance and presumption, and overrate himself, rather we should be ready to humble ourselves in order to submit to whatever pleases God" (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon Seven).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

(1) Like Calvin, Luther attempts to define the meaning of honor: "Honor includes not only love but also deference, humility, and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward the majesty hidden within them. It requires us not only to address them affectionately and reverently, but above all to show by our actions, both of heart and of body, that we respect them very highly and that next to God we give them the very highest place." We are to revere parents as "God's representatives". We are to revere our parents through all kinds of circumstances, "to remember that, however lowly, poor, feeble, and eccentric they may be, they are their own father and mother, given them by God."

(2) Luther clearly thinks that this commandment has to do with supporting aging parents when they are unable to support themselves, though this is not its only meaning: "You are to esteem and prize them [parents] as the most precious treasure on earth. In your words you are to behave respectfully toward them, and not address them discourteously, critically, and censoriously, but submit to them and hold your tongue, even if they go too far. You are to honor them by your actions...serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor."

(3) For Luther, honoring parents is a form of serving God. However, like Aquinas and Calvin, Luther does not think that parents have absolute authority over their children: "If God's Word and will are placed first and observed, nothing ought to be considered more important than the will and word of our parents, provided that these too, are subordinated to obedience toward God and are not set into opposition to the preceding commandments."

(4) Luther complains about the family situation of his day, saying that both young and old are negligent in their obligations (he does not imagine that all parents are ideal): "young and old are together wayward and unruly; they have no sense of modesty or honor; they do nothing until they are driven by blows; and they defame and depreciate one another behind their backs...Neither can parents, as a rule, do very much; one fool trains another, and as they have lived, so live their children after them."

(5) Like Aquinas and Calvin, Luther understands this commandment to be about gratitude: "...it is our duty before the world to show gratitude for the kindness and for all the good things we have received from our parents. But here again the devil rules the world; children forget their

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parents, as we all forget God, and no one takes thought how God feeds, guards, and protects us and how many blessings of body and soul he bestows upon us." This commandment reminds us of what our parents have done for us; it brings us to the point at which "everybody recognizes that he has received his body and life from them and that he has been nourished and nurtured by them when otherwise he would have perished a hundred times in his own filth."

(6) Like Calvin, Luther sees parental authority as playing a role in God's purposes; such authority tames our pride and disobedience: "Why, do you think, is the world now so full of unfaithfulness, shame, misery, and murder. It is because everyone wishes to be his own master, be free from all authority, care nothing for anyone, and do whatever he pleases." But parental authority is not absolute. God does not want "to have knaves or tyrants in this office and responsibility...Parents should consider that they owe obedience to God, and that, above all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge the duties of their office, not only to provide for the material support for their children...but especially to bring them up to the praise and honor of God. Therefore do not imagine that the parental office is a matter of your pleasure or whim."