

Ten Commandments Series: “10 Keys to the Joyful Life”

#5: “God’s Code of Honor”

Matthew 15:1-11 and Exodus 20:12 (NLT)

By Rev. John Gill

Years ago in one of my churches, I preached a sermon series based on children’s stories and fairy tales, a series I called, “The Gospel According to ‘Once Upon a Time.’” (Maybe I’ll do that here someday.) It was a lot of fun to think about beloved stories from our childhood from a whole new perspective, to see what biblical truths they convey. We all love fairy tales.

But the truth is that not all fairy tales are pleasant and easy to hear. Have you ever read any of the stories by The Brothers Grimm? Often their tales are not the kind of stories you would choose to read to your small children before sending them off to bed (unless you wanted them to have nightmares). But they are powerful stories, none the less.

One of the less-familiar of Grimm’s stories tells of an old man who lived with his son and daughter-in-law. It seems that the poor old man had tremors so badly that he had a great deal of trouble getting his spoon to his mouth without spilling the food all over the beautifully pressed table cloth his daughter-in-law had so carefully made.

The woman was so disgusted with her father-in-law’s uncouth table manners that she constantly ranted and raved to her husband. So, one day, she and her husband took the fumbling old man to a corner of the kitchen, set him on a stool, and gave him his food in an earthenware bowl. NOW they would no longer be troubled by his trembling hands; NOW the precious tablecloth was no longer soiled by his dribbled food.

One day, his trembling got so bad that the old man dropped the bowl and broke it. This time, the daughter-in-law really lost her temper. “You are a pig,” she shouted, “and pigs must eat from a trough!” And so, they made a little wooden trough-shaped bowl, and he ate from that.

Now, this couple’s pride-and-joy was their little four year old son. One evening, they noticed the boy playing very intently with blocks of wood. When the father asked what he was doing, the boy looked up with a smile, and said, “I’m making a trough to feed you and Momma out of when I get big.”

This morning, we have come to the fifth of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

I suppose that for many people, THIS may be the most familiar of all the Ten Commandments, (especially to our children). After all, they hear it all the time . . . when they misbehave, or disobey, or spout off to mom or dad, we come back with “The Bible says, “Honor your father and mother.”” And even though it usually makes little difference in their behavior, we feel a little more self-righteous because we are quoting the Bible to our children.

Now, while it IS true that the Bible DOES call on small children to obey their parents, that is NOT the main issue here in the fifth commandment. This commandment is not addressed to little children. It is intended for adults – adult children. God didn’t go to all the trouble to issue this commandment simply

to tell little kids that they should obey daddy and mommy and to eat all the veggies. This command focuses on how well you and I, who are adult children, honor and respect OUR parents!

Apparently, in Biblical times, there was a problem with neglect of the elderly. This commandment is intended to protect elderly parents from being driven out of their homes when they were no longer able to work and contribute to the household. In other words, apparently in some ancient cultures, when a person was no longer a productive member of the family, they might be asked to leave!

Now, before we get all “holier than thou” about this and shake our heads in disbelief at how heartless those primitive peoples were, we have to admit that OUR society is also guilty of this. American culture is not very accepting of the aging process, nor of those who, because of their age or physical condition, no longer can contribute to society.

In America, you count ONLY if you are productive. A person’s very identity is wrapped up with what he or she does, and our status in society is measured by how successful we are at doing it. (Isn’t that the first thing we ask when we meet someone? – “What do you do?”) In our society, we highly honor and reward people who do their jobs well and contribute much, but we have very little tolerance for anyone who is unproductive – and by the world’s standard, older folks are unproductive.

We also live in a culture that worships youth. In America, either you are young, or are trying to fool people into believing you are young. We dye our hair, buy lots of cosmetics, dress in the latest youthful styles, and visit plastic surgeons – always searching for that illusive “fountain of youth.” Science is even working feverishly, trying to discover the “aging gene” in our genetic code so that someday, we may be able to avoid old age altogether. You see, in America, it is a sin to grow old, and it’s an even greater sin to be old and idle.

And since we, as a nation, are in denial about getting older, we who may be younger (relatively speaking) often turn our backs on those who are already up in years. Those who consider themselves “younger” sometimes find themselves avoiding the elderly because they make them feel uncomfortable – Older folks remind us that someday we will be just like them. And as a result, we don’t take our elders seriously – we devalue them. We dismiss them as being of little importance.

Americans who may be “younger” can show that they devalue elders in many ways. For instance, many people will do anything they can to avoid walking into a nursing home (much less, a funeral home). It can be such a sad thing to visit in many nursing homes and see all the people who have been warehoused there, just waiting to die, with no one in their family bothering to visit. We read news reports about elder abuse and neglect. We show how we feel about elders when we close our ears to the wealth of wisdom and experience they have to share. We prove we devalue our seniors when politicians don’t show any interest in issues affecting the aged - except when election time rolls around.

Yes, we today are just as guilty of devaluing our seniors as they were in Biblical times. Unfortunately, times haven’t changed all that much, and neither has human nature.

But the Bible says that this is NOT the way it is supposed to be. Instead of devaluing our elders, the command of God is that we should “honor” them. Now, what exactly does that mean?

The Hebrew word translated “honor” literally means, “to give weight to.” In other words, while it may be our tendency to not take our aging parents seriously – to make “light” of them – to dismiss them as unimportant to our lives... God says that we should be doing just the opposite: that we must give them great “weight” and importance.

The English word, “honor,” can be defined as “to esteem, respect, revere, or regard.” So when we honor our parents, we hold them in the highest esteem and regard – seeing them, not as worthless has-beens, but as priceless treasures and gifts from God.

So, this is the basic meaning of this commandment: to honor, revere, respect, and esteem our parents, especially as they grow older, and to treat them with honor and dignity, just as we hope our children will one day treat us.

But there’s still more to be considered when thinking about this fifth commandment. The commandment doesn’t stop there.

It’s interesting that this is the only commandment of all ten that comes with a promise attached. There is a REASON we are told to honor our parents... “Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God will give you.” In other words, there is something about honoring parents that ensures a joyful fulfilled life, and a strong and healthy society.

I think the clue to this promise is in where this commandment falls in the overall order of the Ten. It seems that the Ten Commandments are divided into two sections (or tablets, as the scriptures tell us). The first four outline how we are to relate to God. The last six describe how we are to relate to others.

If that is so, then for some reason, God decided to make this commandment about honoring our parents the introduction to the second set of commands dealing with how we can live happily with others. What is it about “honoring” our parents that makes it important enough to lead off the second section of the Ten Commandments?

It all has to do with, what I’m calling “God’s Code of Honor” that runs throughout the final six commandments and ties them all together. It’s really a Biblical principle at work: You can tell how well a person will relate to others in life by looking at how they treat their parents. How we honor, or fail to honor, our parents has all kinds of implications for all our other relationships.

So, let’s look briefly at three truths that are at work in “God’s code of honor,” and see what they have to tell us about our relationships.

1) Here’s the first truth: **When we honor our parents, we are honoring God.**

In the Bible, we are taught to call God our “Father.” He is our Heavenly Parent, and we are His children. This first truth says that, if we can’t honor our earthly parents, we are not fully able to honor God, our Heavenly Parent.

Jesus dealt with this in our scripture for this morning. In Jesus’ day, it was the expectation that adult children would care for and support their elderly parents. And most did. However, the religious leaders had made one exception to that rule, that removed the legal obligation to care for parents. Called “the

Law of Corban,” it provided that a person could give the Temple the money they would have spent on caring for their parents. And since that was considered a more noble use for that money, they were no longer bound by any obligation to their parents.

Jesus insisted that, because the command to honor father and mother came from God himself, it superseded any human laws or traditions. And since the command came from God, to break the command, even on a technicality, was to put your relationship with God Himself in jeopardy. Simply put, Jesus was saying that you can’t truly honor God if you fail to honor your parents.

Now, let me pause here for a moment to clarify something. I am aware that this is not easy for some of us to hear because we all know that some parents don’t deserve to be honored. I was fabulously blessed to have had godly parents – I’ve never had any difficulty in respecting and honoring them.

But I know that not all parents are godly or honorable. In fact, some of you may have had the experience of having fathers or mothers who were somewhat less than ideal. Maybe they neglected you, or overly criticized you. Perhaps one of your parents abandoned or rejected you, or even abused you. How are we supposed to honor those kinds of parents?

The answer: We honor them, not for THEIR sake. We do it for GOD’S sake. We honor them, not because they deserve it, but because God commands it.

You know, when you stop to think about it, it’s a good thing none of us get what we deserve. God has chosen to honor you and me with His love and grace, even though we don’t deserve it. And he calls on us to graciously honor our parents, even though they may be undeserving of that honor and respect. We do it for God’s sake.

You see, we can’t always choose who we will love, but we CAN choose who we will honor. Louis Smeeds, in his book, “Mere Mortality,” put it like this: *“To love is a natural impulse, to honor is a moral choice.”*

When you get right down to it, to honor a person who has wronged us is a form of forgiveness. And like forgiveness, the main beneficiary of the act is the one doing the honoring or forgiving, rather than the one being honored or forgiven. And when we forgive and show honor to our parents, we discover, to our wonderful surprise, that WE are liberated from the anger and resentment that has bound us for so long. Then, and only then, can our relationship with God, our Heavenly Parent, become all He intends for it to be.

So, the first truth is that, when we honor our parents, we honor God.

2) The second truth is like it: **When we honor our parents, we are freed to honor others.**

There is nothing more basic in all of life than the relationship between parents and children. That is probably why God placed this commandment as first among all the commandments dealing with relationships. If we can’t honor those with whom we have our most basic and intimate relationships, how can we ever hope to honor anyone else?

When children (of any age) can't or won't give honor to their parents, they will run into all kinds of problems in life.

It will impact their marriages. Weddings are some of the most stressful things I have to do as a pastor. The responsibility of deciding whether or not I feel comfortable marrying two people is not something I take lightly. Sometimes, when working with a couple, I will sense that either the bride or groom has no respect for one or both parents. When that happens, it sends up lots of "red-flags!" When a person goes into a marriage and can't bring themselves to honor their own parents (whether they deserve it or not), they WILL have trouble giving honor to their spouse. And if they *do* go ahead and marry, I'm never surprised when I learn that their marriage has failed.

The same kind of thing happens when parenting. If people with children don't have good relationships with *their* parents, they will likely fail to be good parents to their own children. They won't respect and honor them any more than they do their parents, and their children will turn away from them.

And you don't have to be a sociologist to see the result of teens who won't honor their parents: You could make a good case that this is the root cause of many of our social ills – look at the youth in trouble – those in detention centers. They may be very different from one another in many ways, but one characteristic will be true for most all of them – they all have difficulty honoring their parents. And because they have broken this most basic of commandments, they are vulnerable to breaking all the others – falling one by one, like dominoes. Their lives are trapped by sin, drugs, crime, selfishness, greed, promiscuity, and rebellion against God. All because they refuse to honor mom and dad.

Yes, honoring father and mother is the first step in learning how to honor everyone else. So honoring our parents leads to honoring God and others.

3) But there is one more truth to learn: **When we honor our parents, we bring honor on ourselves.**

On a video I watched some time back, Adrian Snell was talking about this very subject, and he used "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" as an illustration of how we bring honor on ourselves when we show honor to our parents.

No doubt we all are well aware of the story Jesus told. This father has a very difficult and ungrateful son who wants to set off on his own. In effect, he tells his father that he wished he were already dead so he could have his share of the inheritance right then. Well, the heartbroken father gives him the money, and the boy sets out for the "far country" where he squanders all his inheritance, and begins to starve. So he takes the only job he can find: slopping the hogs.

One day, as the story goes, he comes to his senses, and realizes just what a brat he had been. He decides to go home to his father and beg – not to be taken back as a son – but to be hired on as a servant.

Now, this was a risky thing to do. According to Jewish law, a child who was so rude to his father could be taken to the gates of the city and stoned to death. So when the son came home, he had no idea what kind of reception he would be receiving.

But when the father hears the son's confession, he forgives him, and not only that, he RERSTORES him to his position as a son.

Why? That's a question we seldom ask about the outcome of this story . . . Why did the father restore him? Could it be – that, for the very first time in their relationship, the son showed his father the honor and respect he deserves! And so the father realized that his son FINALLY had understood about God's Code of Honor.

Friends, do you live your life by "God's Code of Honor?" Have you truly honored your parents, or is there more that you ought to do to show them honor?

I want to challenge everyone here this morning: Take some time this afternoon to do something to honor your parents. If they are still living, maybe give them a call, or write them a note, or drop in for a visit, or do something you know would make them happy – show them you love them. Believe me, the time will come when that won't be possible. And if your parents are no longer living (as is the case for perhaps most of us here today, including me), why not do something special to honor their memory? What could you do to bring honor to them and all they have meant to you?

Either way - let's keep the Fifth Commandment today. God promises that, if we do, WE will be the ones who are blessed!