

Delighting in Honoring Authority

Heidelberg Catechism #49

Exodus 20:12 | Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 104

“**H**ONOR your father and your mother.” “It’s a good thing my parents are no longer alive. Check that commandment off the list.” “It’s a good thing I don’t live anywhere near my parents; I can’t handle it anymore.” “I can’t wait to move out of the house. Finally, I’ll be free!”

Honoring and submitting to parents is not natural to us in our fallen human condition. God knows this and it’s part of the reason he gave this commandment. And as a child of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, and born again by the Spirit I have been made new and am enabled to say, “I delight in the law of God in my inner being” (Rom. 7:22); “I delight in this law of honoring father and mother.”

What does it mean to show **honor**? In ancient society this was much more concrete than today. Back then to honor someone meant to treat them according to their weight and worth like silver and gold. To honor someone is to show that you value them. 1 Peter 2:12 speaks of this broad principle of life saying, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” We are to live honorably because our

lives reflect the God who has made us and redeemed us and we want him to be glorified by others who come to live the same way. This broad principle is illustrated the commandment before us. Because it's an illustration of a principle our Catechism says God wills that "I [am to] show honor, love, and faithfulness to...*all those* in authority over me" (HC, Q&A 104). Let me give you three concrete examples of honor we are to show honor.¹

HONORING FAMILIAL AUTHORITY

First and most obvious we are to live HONORING FAMILIAL AUTHORITY.

The Proverbs 1 speaks powerfully on this. Solomon says, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching" (v. 8). That's the commandment: positively "hear" and negatively "forsake not." Why? Verse 9: "for they [*your father's instruction and mother's teaching*] are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck." They are like beautiful and valuable decorations on your life. Treasure them!

Let's also turn to the New Testament and Paul letter to the Ephesians 6:1-3. First he gives the application: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (v. 1). Children, he assumes you are Christians so you are to obey your parents as you would obey the Lord. Then he gives the reason for the application: the fifth commandment. And notice what he says about it:

“this is the first commandment with a promise” and he quotes the latter part of the command: “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land” (vv. 2, 3). The word Paul actually uses is “earth.” We’re no longer in the Promised Land but spread across the world so no matter where children find themselves, obey the Lord by honoring your parents! How? Children, do you thank God for your parents? Do you imitate all the good things they do? Do you submit to their correction? Does this mean I to submit to them if they’re wrong? Our Catechism gives a helpful guideline: “I [am to] be patient with their failings” (Q&A 104). God knows your parents are sinners like you but he promises to use them.

HONORING CIVIL AUTHORITY

Another way to live an honorable life is HONORING CIVIL AUTHORITY. We are to honor our biological fathers and mothers but Scripture also speaks of civil authorities as fathers and mothers as well (cf. WLC, Q&A 125). I think one of the ways it’s so important for us as Reformed Christians who are distinct from so many of our evangelical friends is to think, act, and speak differently than them about our leaders. The Christian left and right both have this in common: they think the kingdom of God somehow comes through their political parties and politicians. And regardless of whether

there's a "D" or an "R" after a person's name, we need to show honor.

Turn for a moment to 1 Peter 2:13–17. Peter says, "Be subject for the Lord's sake"—his reputation is on the line, humanly-speaking—"to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good." We owe honor to the civil authority even to tyrants like those the apostles lived under! He goes on to say, "For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people." Then comes this: "Live as people who are free"—he said in chapter 1 we are redeemed from the bondage of sin—"not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God." And here is how you do that: "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." Isn't that amazing how he says "fear God" and "honor the emperor" in the same breath?

Look also at Romans 13:1–7. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Why? "For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." God is Lord of all and he raises up human authority on earth. Because of this Paul says, "Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those

who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." Paul goes on to apply this, saying, "Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." Even more practically he says, "For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

HONORING ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

Finally, we are to live HONORING ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY. Paul speaks of himself as a nursing mother and a loving father in 1 Thessalonians 2 and as a spiritual father to Timothy elsewhere. I pray this moves you to a willing and cheerful attitude towards us in our counsel and exhortations.

Look with me at one last passage in closing: Hebrews 13:17. This really is a moving passage. He says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Why?

“For they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” As there were watchmen placed on the walls of Zion so God has placed pastors and elders as watchmen over your souls. We know to whom much is given, much is required. We are utterly humbled by this and take it seriously. We want to please God here. We want to follow the Word. We agonize over the wayward. We labor to shepherd you better. Then notice how the writer says members are to do this: “Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Here he is alluding to the groaning and murmuring of the Israelites in the wilderness. Let leaders lead in the name of God with joy. It’s hard enough knowing that God will judge us more harshly, let alone adding to that your complaints. If you let us lead, it will lead to your spiritual advantage.

Let us live an honorable life to all whom the Lord places over us, brothers and sisters. Let us beg God to enable us to such an attitude!

Endnotes

¹ These three traditional categories of family, church, and commonwealth are listed in Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 124.