

CHAPTER 8
Honor Your Father and Mother
a foundation for healthy biblical relationships

Introduction

The one commandment that you would expect to be discussed in a book on parenting is the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”¹ I challenge anyone to find a book on parenting written from a Christian perspective that does not quote this commandment somewhere in its pages. This verse must also be the most quoted verse by parents in all of Scripture. However, this commandment is more than just a verse to present to our children when they are struggling with obedience. It is a commandment that applies to parents as well. This chapter challenges parents to apply the fifth commandment more broadly than they may have in the past. The foundation of this commandment certainly begins in the parent-child relationship, but parental example is truly the starting point. It applies not only in our relationship as parents to our children, but also in our relationships with all sorts of other people.

¹ Exodus 20:12 (ESV).

Honoring Your Parents in the Bible

The importance of honoring parents is established early in the biblical accounts. In the account of Noah, his son Ham dishonors him by failing to protect his dignity as he lies exposed in a drunken stupor. After Noah learns of what transpired he utters a curse against his son.² In addition, the Mosaic laws of the Old Testament clearly establish the need for children to live in honor of their parents. For example, Deuteronomy 21:18-21 contains prescriptions for how to deal with a son who persistently refuses to yield to parental instruction. The result may be surprising to modern ears: capital sentence is pronounced. Though that sentence is not applied today, Scripture clearly shows the severity with which God views sinning against this commandment.

In addition to these passages from the Law, there are also repeated calls in the book of Proverbs to the child to hear the instructions of his parents and live by them.³ These verses are really just reminders to live in accord with the commandments of God. But the calls to obedience to parents are not only in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the Lord Jesus Christ himself models obedience to the fifth commandment. He lives in obedience to his parents.⁴ Beyond the descriptions of Christ both Ephesians 6:1-3 and Colossians 3:20 call children to obey their parents. No amount of “nuance” will be able to change the clear and unwavering teaching of the Bible: children are to honor their parents.

Good and Necessary Consequence

The biblical teaching on this commandment is explained in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q/A #124. The writers of this teaching tool outline the scope of what is meant by “your father and your mother” as follows: “By father and mother, in the fifth commandment, are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God’s ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth.”⁵ The catechism states the fifth commandment has much more in view than simply relationships between children and parents. Certainly, parent-child relationships are included in this commandment, but the reach is greater. Also included are relationships inside the extended family, the church and also society as a whole. Outside the home, this commandment governs interactions with church officers. However, an even greater circle can be drawn around this commandment. Its intention is to govern interactions with everyone in society. In other words, this commandment deals with all relationships of authority.

² Genesis 10:20-27.

³ For examples see Proverbs 1:8-9; 3:1-2; 6:20-22; 8:10.

⁴ Luke 2:51.

⁵ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q/A 124.

The writers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* summarize the requirements of the fifth commandment this way: “That I show all honour, love and fidelity, to my father and mother, and all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand.”⁶ The fifth commandment is broad and it covers all relationships with those in authority. This application can be seen in Scripture in such passages as Romans 13:1 where the Christian is called to submit to governing authorities, or the civil government. Hebrews 13:17 calls the Christian to show respect to church leadership. These passages, and others like them, flow from the fifth commandment and demonstrate the breadth of this commandment.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* summarizes the purpose of the fifth commandment exactly that way: “The fifth commandment requireth the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to everyone in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.”⁷ This commandment has implications for everyone, because all live in these three “places and relations”. All people are superiors to some, inferiors to others, and equals with many. In all these relationships the Christian is to operate with a willingness to respect and defer, not because of the value of the person, but because of the value of the One who gave them their position. That is the principle that sits behind the fifth commandment: respect for fellow man according to the God-given relationship with them. In order to think through how that applies to parenting this chapter will divide this important issue in two different categories: honoring in the family, church and society first by our actions and second by our words.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

Before getting to the specifics of honoring in action, it is necessary to come to terms with the reason why children should be taught to honor in action. Parents should be investing in their children’s lives teaching them to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. That is the purpose of this book: to give parents tools to help them disciple their children and raise them up in the fear of the Lord. To honor God requires children to learn some abstract concepts. Take for example the issue of honoring authority figures. When parents tell children to honor someone the children do not have anything to draw on to given them an idea as to how to accomplish that task. Void of any practical examples of what shape honor may take, the words become meaningless. Parents must provide ways for their children to practice honoring those around.

⁶ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q/A 104.

⁷ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q/A 64.

Passages like Colossians 3:20 make it fairly clear that children are to obey their parents in everything. As an extrapolation from the fifth commandment, obedience is an expression of honor. When children obey their parents, they are practicing the commandment to honor their father and mother. This practice should be encouraged from the very youngest age. Positively, that means parents are to establish an expectation in their homes that obedience is not optional. Christian parents should not negotiate with their children to gain compliance. Parents are placed in positions of authority, and children should be expected to obey them. This obedience will look different based on the age of the child. At a certain age, children may be permitted the freedom to interact about the nature of the instruction given and the reasons behind it and other considerations. However, disobedience to parents should never be accepted, no matter what age children may be. Parenting with the expectation of obedience means that parents should not buy their children's allegiance with the promise of rewards. Parents instruct and then have the sometimes tiring responsibility to enforce. Even if they do not feel like doing the hard work of parenting, they are responsible to do what they should and not what they want. By taking these steps parents are teaching their children what it means to honor those in authority over them.

This same point about the fifth commandment can be made negatively. Parents may not allow their children to disobey. To allow children to learn that there are situations where it is acceptable to disobey their parents, is to teach them a pattern of personal determination when it comes to obedience to all of God's law. Colossians 3:20 does not give that kind of picture. Instead children are to obey their parents "in everything." The commandment is not optional, in that it is not up to the desires of the child. Neither is it conditional. Circumstances, age, and personality do not excuse them from this command. Obedience should be expected of any child under the parents' direct care and rebellion forbidden. To allow disobedience in the home to go unaddressed is to allow rebellion against the Lord. However, parents should also be careful to distinguish between rebellion and innocent mistakes made in the process of growing up.

To discern the nature of a child's behavior requires much wisdom. Add to that the reality that children naturally disguise their rebellion through deception. The parent is often outwitted, outflanked, and outsmarted. That is why the parent has need for much prayer. The parents' goal is to determine the nature of the child's behavior to guide them in their understanding of what it means to honor their God. There are those moments when parents may not be sure what just happened. For example, parents may issue an instruction and their child does something very cute or helpful in place of doing what they asked of them. The parents will begin to question himself: "Do they really know what they are doing?" Their understanding can be tested by asking what their instruction was. If they repeat the parental instruction accurately, however cute their actions may be, this choice is

a willful disregarding of mom and dad's instructions. It must be placed in the "rebellion" category. Fortunately, not all decisions about whether children are being rebellious will be complicated. There are other moments when the intention of their behavior is blatantly clear.

One example of the full-blown war variety in the Gleason family took place when our oldest son was about two years old. In our house the little ones need to occupy themselves in play while the other activities of the day run their course. To help them we assign them various activities to help occupy their time. Our son's toy was, perhaps foolishly, placed by all the bins where we stored bulk food items we had purchased. One of the items we purchased was chocolate chips. At some point Lisa, my wife, realized she had not heard the little fellow rattle his toys for some time. When she turned the corner she saw my son sitting on the buckets of bulk-food helping himself to a grand feast of chocolate, and it was everywhere. Not only was there chocolate all over his face, but also all over the floor. Although somewhat humorous to stumble across those situations as parents, it was our task to make sure he understood that obedience to our instructions was not negotiable, no matter how great the temptation of chocolate might be. So after we took a picture for future reference, we applied appropriate discipline to the seat of learning. Some sin is obvious, some is more subtle. Parents are to discern between the different kinds of disobedience and insist that their children live to the biblical standard of honoring their parents, which is demonstrated through obedience to their commands. By doing so they are not restricting their children's development and curiosity, but giving them opportunities to express their love for God properly through their obedience to him.

Instead, when children ignore parental instructions, they should be brought back to a biblical standard of behavior. If a little toddler runs off in the other direction when his parents call him, he must not be allowed to revel in his sin. For toddlers, there are not that many opportunities to assert their autonomy. However, running away from an explicit command is one of the ways they can. If parents fail to enforce the command to honor, they are teaching them it is acceptable to disobey dad, and more significantly God by disregarding his law. Their behavior may even seem to be cute when they are eighteen months. However, when the pattern of behavior takes fruit in an eight year-old or especially in a teen-ager, all the cuteness has worn away. The exhortation from God's word is to require children to live in obedience in everything and parents must insist on it. Far from creating a harmful tension in the parent-child relationship, faithful parenting in this area will actually give more freedom to delight in each other's company. Perhaps not in the short term, but certainly in the long term.

By correctly calling children to a standard of obedience parents teach them what it means to give honor. This lesson is essential to being able to also live for God's honor and glory in the workplace,

society, church and even their own future families. The child's behavior must be conformed to the commands of Scripture when they are young. However, Mom and Dad's example will have tremendous bearing on whether children will be willing to carry out these biblical instructions.

A Note to Mom & Dad

Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21 teach parents to train their children in such a way that they will not become discouraged. To clarify, these passages are not teaching that parents should assess their instructions based on the child's emotional response to what is being required. The Bible is not requiring parents to ask children only to honor them only if they do not get discouraged by such a process. If that were the standard there would be many occasions where children could claim discouragement and the parental instruction would be invalid. For example, children may become discouraged when prohibited from kicking their siblings in the shins. They may be frustrated when restricted in their entertainment by content or when parents set standards of modesty. Discouragement does not necessarily curb instruction. Parental restraints are entirely justified, even required in those examples above. Paul himself, after harshly rebuke the Corinthian congregation in his first letter, explains himself in the second: "For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while."⁸ The grief, or discouragement, the rebuke caused did not prevent the apostle from delivering the needed correction. Thankfully, the Bible clarifies when discouragement is acceptable and when it is not.

Colossians 3:21 clarifies the idea behind discouragement in parenting. In that verse, Paul calls parents to make sure they do not provoke their children: "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."⁹ The Scripture's concern is not discouragement, but discouragement because of provocation. Instead of focusing on the emotions of the child primarily, this verse is mainly concerned with challenging the father to a specific kind of child rearing. Parental decisions and manner should not provoke children to discouragement. Parents can unnecessarily provoke their children in many ways. Although a comprehensive list is not possible below are a few examples. These should be able to generate enough thought that the unlisted methods as well.

One of the main ways that we provoke our children is by not being faithful to the principle given to parents in Deuteronomy 6:6-7. In chapter 2 we learned this verse calls parents to be involved in their children's lives for the sake of passing on wisdom to them. When parents neglect the faithful, consistent biblical instruction required in Scripture, their children will become discouraged because parents have not taught the principle behind the action. If parents do not provide the biblical rea-

⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:8 (ESV).

⁹ Colossians 3:21 (ESV).

son for their instruction, children will not be able to extrapolate godly behavior to different situations. In those cases, parents will become frustrated micromanagers, and children will be provoked to discouragement because they cannot navigate life without being tripped up. For example, if parents are working diligently to teach their children to respect their instructions by responding to directives with a “Yes sir,” or “Yes dad,” without ever teaching them the principle of respect for authority behind those words, they will not know to apply it to other situations. If they do not understand they are to show respect to the adults in their lives, they will view these words as just another hoop they have to jump through to keep dad and mom happy. However, if parents teach them that God wants them to honor their parents and their authorities and that saying these words is a demonstration of respect, they will be able to learn and apply that principle in a host of other situations: at church, at the grocery store, at sporting events, when they visit friends and family. As children mature, they need to understand the reason behind what they are doing. That is what parents are commanded to do in Deuteronomy 6. Parents must teach their children the importance of respect while driving to the store so that when they are in the store they will have a framework from which they can demonstrate the requirements of the fifth commandment for the glory and honor of the Lord.

Another way to provoke children to discouragement is to treat them as if they are the most important addition to the failing universe. To maintain this status, parents are forced to focus on their children’s happiness. When children take another little child’s toy they are not corrected because he will cry. When children speak rudely and ungratefully when visiting someone’s home, they are not corrected because they are just expressing their thoughts. The examples can go on and on. However, when it comes to parenting the primary motivation should not be the child’s happiness. Even if it were possible to maintain happiness throughout all of life, happiness is not the goal of the Christian. People are called to glorify God and enjoy him forever.¹⁰ But parenting in a way that is concentrated happiness, only sets children up for discouragement. In a world where so many people view themselves as the center of the universe, it will not be long before children run into serious problems. There will soon be times when their desires have to compete with those of another. Since both children cannot have their way they are sure to become discouraged. But beyond their younger years, fostering this kind of mentality will also have great consequences on older children.

When children are young parents are forming the way they view the world. If they teach them to consider themselves at the center, they train them to make happiness their goal. This will make it very difficult to deny their personal desires. However, Scripture teaches that “whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”¹¹ The principle of self-denial is central to the

¹⁰ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q/A 1.

¹¹ Matthew 10:38, (ESV).

Scriptures, not self-satisfaction. Parents must prepare them for the reality of Christian living because people outside the home will not be as interested in their happiness. Imagine your son, trained in the philosophy of happiness at all costs, reporting for work the first day on the job and after being asked to perform a task that is not to his liking. If he announces that he would rather not do that part of his job, it will not take the company long to find a replacement for him. It is an extreme example, and somewhat silly, but I am trying to make a point. In parenting, decisions can have long or short-term provocations. Or imagine a child being asked to deny himself for the sake of being faithful to Christ. If he has been taught that the commandments of God can be set aside for the pursuit of his happiness, seeking Christ will become a secondary pursuit as the desires of the flesh take center stage. The frustration that will result from a child-centered parenting style may not be realized for many years. But parenting is both about immediate and future consequences.

The final example of how parents can exasperate children focuses on language and tone. Much is communicated in through tone. Being a parent can at times be one of the most trying activities anyone will ever engage in. Not only is it complicated because of the sin that dwells in the child's heart, but also because of the sin that dwells in the parent's heart. When parents allow emotions to overcome how they speak to their children, or behave toward them, parents will act as a discouragement to their children. By their tone they end up invalidating the content of their words. The book of Proverbs tells us as much: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."¹² Harsh words will discourage children from following instruction. Instead of encouraging them toward love and good works, parents will have encouraged them toward harboring anger in their hearts. That does not mean that there may not be occasion to speak sternly to children. There are times when the seriousness of the moment will be conveyed by the tone of voice. However, if parents are harsh with their children in the moments when they are instructing them as they "walk along the road", they will discourage their children. When children come to parents with their questions about the Bible and are answered harshly, or impatiently, their faith will wither. The fifth commandment does not only govern the relationships of inferiors, but also those of superiors. Parents, have obligations to their children in that regard.

Discouragement will come to all children's lives, but parents should not be the agents through which it comes. By being faithful to instruct their children in God's word can guard children against discouragement. They will know what is expected of them even when not all possible scenarios are given. By teaching children that they are not the center of the universe parents give them a healthy perspective on life, one that honors and glorifies God. With these cautions in place, there are some specific practical helps that can assist children to honor the fifth commandment.

¹² Proverbs 15:1 (ESV).

Practical Implications

It is entirely appropriate to provide children of all ages some ways that they can practice what they have been taught. As parents teach their children about the fifth commandment and the importance of honoring those in authority over them, part of the instruction should move from the realm of theory into the realm of practice. The commandments themselves are made for that purpose. They are instituted that people would know how to love God and our neighbor. Parents ought to make sure their children have a chance to practice what they have been taught. To that end, here are some ideas to get us started.

Responding to instruction. If parents tell little Johnny to clean up his room, his response is a clear picture of his impression of the fifth commandment. For example, if he responds with a “No,” it is fairly clear that he has the impression that the whole idea of honoring father and mother is unnecessary. If he responds with a “Sure,” he likely perceives himself as an equal among many, one of the knights of the round table, working together with these other people to rule over the kingdom. But if he responds with a respectful acknowledgment such as “Yes sir,” or “Yes dad,” all of a sudden he has communicated two things. First, he indicates his intention to follow the instruction. Second, he has indicated he realizes he is operating in a relationship where he is the inferior. Of course there are many ways in which children can turn this response into disrespectful defiance. The tone behind their speaking will communicate much, and parents must be mindful of it. However, generally speaking, this kind of response allows the child to learn what it means to honor his parents. Those instructions give parents a platform from which they can give generic instruction about honoring grown-ups. At that point parents are teaching them boundaries and expressions that are not tied only to one particular situation. That means that when children encounter other relationships where they as inferiors are interacting with superiors, they will have a framework from which they can operate and relate in a way that obeys the fifth commandment. Once they have learned this lesson in the home, there will be countless applications outside the home.

For example, when our children become old enough to take a part-time job, this lesson will serve them well. It is not difficult to find disrespect, or lack of care, from an employee while shopping in a store. Parents must teach children the common courtesy of how to honor those who are in positions deserving their respect. By establishing this principle at home, parents teach their children how to respond in a way that bears good witness to their God when they leave home and interact with other people in the culture in general.

Interacting with the elderly. The home is the training ground for the foundations that will shape the child’s life. What they learn in the home is to be applied in other places. For example, church

relationships are also effected by what children are taught at home. When children interact with the senior saints at church, it is important they understand how to honor those who have gone before them as their elders. They will do so through their tone and words, as much as in their actions.

We have had the great joy of having many older people be involved in our family. One time I was visiting a senior saint who was 103 years old. I thought it would be a treat for my sons to come along to hear what life was like a century ago, and it was. We had a wonderful visit with some interesting questions. At one point, one of my more impulsive children asked, “Were you alive during the civil war?” The question was still received graciously because it was asked in a spirit of respect. My sons knew this wonderful lady was not their equal. Her age set her apart from them. It is a great victory when children are able to recognize this truth. Many today would not be able to distinguish between youth and age and the biblical principle of honoring elders as found in the law: “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.”¹³ This commandment to honor elders is an application of the fifth commandment. It simply takes that commandment and applies it in the public square. Parents ought to teach that principle to their children.

Using titles of respect. Once the principle of honoring age is taught parents must be careful not frustrate them by not showing how to practice this principle. There are many ways parents can encourage their children to honor their elders. An easy way is to use proper titles with adults. Oddly enough, some adults may resist these attempts by some. In our own family we have at times had to explain we are trying to show our children ways in which they can show respect to their elders. If the adult remains disturbed and offended, at times we have had to compromise and settle on Mr. Joe instead of Mr. Smith. Other times people have come to appreciate being addressed with the title of respect over time. Each will have to weigh pros and cons as to how far to take this issue. However, remember the intent: to honor the person being addressed. If the child ends up offending people by trying to honor them, it is likely the goal is not being achieved.

Greeting people. Another way to allow children to practice respect is to encourage them to say “Hello” to people. Choose one of the older members of the congregation and encourage your children to greet them Sunday morning at church, or briefly sit with them at a church social function. This interaction will naturally show children there are benefits and delights to these relationships. Just by talking to Mrs. Smith, children will learn quickly there are things they do not know that Mrs. Smith does. Hopefully, the older people will be blessed by the vibrancy of the young ones too. In our own experience we were able to practice this with the pastor of a small church we attended for a number of years. Pastor Doug was always willing to take our little ones on his knee and to talk to

¹³ Leviticus 19:32 (ESV).

them even at a very busy time of his day. Sometimes the comments were simple, and other times he talked to them about the Bible. In all the interaction our children learned a healthy respect for this older man and it allowed them to learn what it means, in a practical sense, to honor those who are older.

Showing deference. Another way children can be taught to honor others is by teaching them to show deference to older people. This can be easily taught by inviting guests to serve themselves for lunch before children help themselves. Parents might also encourage their children to get drinks for visitors, hold open doors for the elderly, or offer to carry something to their car for them. Not only does this practice teach respect to their fellow man, but it also helps them realize that they can honor people by placing them ahead of ourselves.

Conclusion

In all the practical applications of the fifth commandment parents must not lose track of what they are seeking to accomplish: to provide a framework in which their children can learn to apply the commandments of Scripture in a broad range of settings for the glory of our God. To do so they must make sure that the application does not become the goal. They should never be satisfied as parents because children know how to say “Yes sir,” when addressed by an older man. What they are always trying to analyze is whether or not the “yes sir” coming out of their mouth reflects is an expression of the joy in their heart flowing from their love for God.

Study Questions

1. What does Deuteronomy 21:18-21 teach about the value God places on children obeying their parents?
2. Why is it important to require specific actions from children when it comes to their relationships with those in authority over them?
3. If disobedience to parental instruction is tolerated in the home, what is the unintentional lesson parents are teaching their children?
4. What is one way parents provoke their children to discouragement? How can it be avoided?
5. From the reading, list one way parents can give practical expression to the fifth commandment for their children? Give one example of how this can be done that is not listed in the book.