

Exodus 20:12

'Honour Your Parents'

Introduction

When Timmy arrives at the home the carers noticed that he regularly stole food and hid it under his pillow.

The counsellors questioned him and the story came out.

Timmy's mother was a prostitute.

Timmy's father regularly beat him and then "made it up" to him through sexual involvement with Timmy.

Because of the household violence, things like regular meal times and having food on hand were unheard of.

And so Timmy had learned to steal and hide food for his self-preservation.

At the other end of life there are other stories.

Take Norman as an example.

Norman is 77.

He lives at home with his wife and two sons, who are 46 and 47.

Both sons are unemployed and not interested in seeking employment.

Norman has been beaten several times by his sons.

On the last occasion, Norman was beaten because he presumed to use his son's towel.

After another incident Norman is interviewed by the local police.

Norman tells the story but refuses to sign a complaint.

Norman knows that if he does there will be another, more severe, beating as soon as he enters the house again.

Norman's sons are living on the dole.

They are also living on Norman's Social Security and pension income.

He is doing some part-time work on the secret in order to have his own spending money.

Somewhere between these stories of child abuse and elder abuse are stories most of us are more familiar with.

Stories of parents being unwilling to let go of their children.

Stories of manipulation of children by their parents and of parents by their children.

Stories of raging arguments about when children will be home, about norms of behaviour, and about where they will live, who they will mix with, who they will marry, what career they will have, and how they will conduct their lives.

This is the world we live in.

A world where children are set against parents and parents against children.

A world where those who gave life feel it is their right to rule that life.

And a world where those who were given life have forgotten its origin.

And it is this world that God speaks to in the 5th commandment in Exodus 20:12:

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

Today we are going to have a look at this commandment.
We will look at what the passage itself means.
We will look at what the rest of the Old Testament has to say about the relationship between parents and children.
We will then take a peek into the New Testament to see what it has to say.
And finally, we will summarise some of the impact of this passage for us.

Understanding Exodus 20:12

Overview

Okay, first let's get some perspective on the verse.

The first thing is to notice that there is a pattern in the ten commandments.

- Commandments 1-4 set out principles relating to relationship with God. Commandments 5-10 set out principles relating to relationship within the covenant community.

The pattern here seems to indicate that the first four commandments are the foundation for those that follow.

Having said this, it appears as though the command about parents and children forms a special function.

It appears to be a bridge between the two sets of commandments.

For example, it shares with the previous command the words 'the Lord your God'.

It also uses words such as 'to honour' that are often used in reference to our relationship with God.

Third, honouring your father and mother is linked with the same sorts of blessings and curses that are talked about in relation to honouring God.

So, how can we summarise all of this?

Perhaps we can put it this way.

The structure of the commandments make it clear that the most important and foundational relationship in life is our relationship with God.

He is the giver of life.

However, when we begin to look at our relationship with other people in the world, we need to recognise that there is a foundational relationship here as well.

For whether we are married or single, young or old, we share one common bond.

We all have parents.

And these parents were together the channel of God's gift of life.

In many ways they were like God to us.

Honour

Okay, now let's have a look at the word 'honour' that is used here.

The word for 'honour' he is linked with the word for 'glory'.

The general sense behind it is the idea of giving weight or importance to something or someone.

It means to prize them highly.

The respect them.

To glorify and esteem them.

It has nuances of caring for and showing affection.

It is a term that is frequently used to describe the proper response to God.

It is a word that is close in meaning to the idea of worship (cf. Psalm 86:9).

Things to note

Okay, now let's take note a few things about the commandment.

The first thing to say is that the commandment probably has adult children more in focus than young children.

It was probably directed towards adult children more than young children.

The second thing to note is that it is an extraordinary commandment in the context of the ancient world.

Other nations talked of honouring fathers.

But this commandment includes mothers as well.

And in the version of this commandment in Leviticus 19:3 is even bolder.

In Leviticus 19:3 the mother is listed before the father.

The third thing to note is that the commandment is somewhat open ended in meaning.

You see, when we read the commandment we want to ask questions such as...

- What does 'honouring' one's parents mean practically?
- Does it mean obedience?
- Does it mean doing what they say no matter what?
- What if the parents are wrong?
- Is there ever a time when children outgrow this commandment?

However, I think this commandment is deliberately vague.

God just wants to be clear to us.

We are to honour our parents.

We need to work out how the details work out.

This is the command and it invites all children to respond in any way that honours parents.

It tells them that in all dealings with parents, respect, esteem, having regard and concern for, and showing affection, considerateness, and appreciation are to be the order of the day.

The fourth thing to note is that the command is open ended in timing.

In other words, there is no indication that there is ever a time when you can stop honouring your parents.

It appears as though there is never a day in human life when this obligation is removed.

The promise

Lastly, let's have a look at the promise that is attached to this commandment.

God says...

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

The first thing to say about the promise given here is that it is probably not meant to be taken individually.

In other words, it is not saying that if we personally honour our father and mother God will personally ensure that we live long in the land that he gives us.

Rather, it probably means that if the nation gets this right it will have a long stay in the land.

This command therefore functions as a warning to the people of God.

This command is so important to God that the breaking of it will jeopardise their possession of the land God has given them.

An Old Testament and ancient world perspective

Okay, so there is the detail of the commandment.

Now let's see what else the Old Testament has to say.

Dishonouring parents – a great sin

This command shows the supreme importance that God gives to the integrity of the family.

God wants his people to live in stability and to have the best.

These good things are fostered in good communities.

And good communities are founded on good family life.

Family life is the bedrock upon which the community of God's people stands.

And so, in the rest of the Bible there are strong warnings to both groups of people – both parents and children.

We can see this within a few short verses in Exodus.

Take a look at Exodus 21:15.

Here God says that the death penalty is to be handed out to someone who curses their mother or father.

Throughout the Old Testament we are told that failure to keep this command is a most grievous sin.

It is linked with extortion of the poor and disadvantaged, sexual sin, and despising God's holy things.

Spouse and parents

There are a couple of other things that need to be said about the Old Testament and this commandment.

As I indicated earlier, it is my belief that this commandment is primarily directed to adult children.

It is also an open ended commandment in terms of timing.

We are to honour our parents all our lives.

However, we need to ask what impact marriage has on this commandment.

And all I can say is this.

Genesis 2 tells us that marriage is about leaving your father and mother and cleaving to your wife.

It is about setting up your own family.

It is therefore about becoming parents yourself.

I take it therefore that this changes things somewhat for you.

You are responsible for making decisions for your family.

And this family is a separate unit from the families you came from.

This will inevitably bring about changes.

It does not change the fact that you must honour your parents.

But it may very well change the details of how that is expressed.

Malachi 4

Now the last thing I want to do is to have a look at the last book of the Old Testament.

Let's turn to Malachi 4.

You see, the story of the Old Testament is a story of failure.

It is a story about how the people of God were unable to live up to the commandments.

They failed to keep God's law.

As a result they were under God's judgment.

The book of Malachi tells us that the people of God are therefore headed for destruction.

However, Malachi tells us that before God's great day of destruction he will send a prophet like Elijah.

This prophet will turn the hearts of God's people to be responsive to God and each other.

And this will be seen in the fact that the hearts of fathers will be turned to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.

What I think God is saying is that he will send someone who will be able to deal with human sinfulness.

And he will be able to deal with the inclination of the human heart to sinfulness.

And the evidence of that God has done this will be that relationships between parents and children will be changed.

We who have come to know Jesus know that this is what was accomplished in him.

He was the one who dealt with sin.

And he is the one who can effectively deal with sinful human hearts.

With this in mind, let's move on to the New Testament and see what else it has to say.

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ²But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

A New Testament perspective

Jesus and his own parents

The first place to start when we get to the New Testament is Jesus himself.

The New Testament tells us that he was not only the means of salvation for us.

He was also the ideal righteous man.

He lived as we are meant to live.

Now if this is so, you'd expect to see this in his relationship with his family.

And this is exactly what happens.

I'd like to concentrate on a few verses that capture this.

First, Luke 2:51 tells us that Jesus lived in submission to his parents.

However, the surrounding verses indicate that Jesus clearly saw that the primary relationship he was in was his relationship with God.

And the rest of his ministry supports this.

He himself treated his mother with respect and honour.

However, he did not let her deter him from his primary obligation toward God.

If Luke 2:51 tells us about the beginning of his life, John 19 tells us about the end of his life.

As Jesus hangs on the cross dying he looks down and sees his mother.

And in his dying breath he makes sure she is looked after.

As life ebbs out of him he honours the one through whom his life had come.

Listen to the passage from John 19:25-27:

*²⁵But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, **“Woman, behold, your son!”** ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, **“Behold, your mother!”** And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*

Getting God and parents into perspective

This balance reflected in the life of Jesus himself is also reflected in his teaching of his disciples.

For Jesus God must always come first.

We can see this in a number of passages but I want to concentrate on just one.

Let's have a quick look at Luke 14.25-33

25 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Jesus is very clear.

Our love for God and the things of God is so strong that our love for other important parts of life is like hatred in comparison.

Jesus is not telling us to hate our parents.

He is just saying that our love for God has to be much stronger than any love we have for other things.

Jesus is simply reflecting what was there in the Old Testament.

Even the commandments make clear that God is to be the first and primary focus of our attention and our affections.

But not using God's demands to avoid obligations to parents

However, Jesus did not for a moment thing we could use God's demand on us as a way to neglect our obligation to honour our parent.

In fact, on one particular occasion he slammed the Pharisees for encouraging people to do exactly this.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." 3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, 6 he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

*8 " 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;
9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "*

Romans 1:30 and 2 Timothy 3:2

However, let's move on to the rest of the New Testament and see what others have to say.

Romans 1:30 and 2 Timothy 3:2 tell us exactly what the Old Testament told us – a wrong attitude to parents is a most grievous sin.

In fact, Paul makes clear that disobedience to parents is a sign of gross and out of control godlessness. A world where people no longer honour their parents is a world that is caught up in the worst sort of sinfulness.

It a world gone astray from God and gone into the depths of depravity.

Colossians 3:20 and Ephesians 6 (note shift – to younger children, fathers not exasperate)

Now let's have a look at Colossians 3:20 and Ephesians 6

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

There are a few things to notice.

First, what Paul says here is a bit different in focus and meaning to what occurs in the Old Testament.

First, it seems to have a primary focus on younger children rather than on adult children.

Second, Paul talks about obedience, which is a lot more specific than the word 'honour'.

This makes a lot of sense if the focus is on younger children in the home.

Third, Paul specifically balances out what was not in the 5th commandment but implied by the rest of the Old Testament – parents have an obligation to children as well.

In particular, Fathers, who are the head of the household, are to be sensitive to the needs of their children.

They are not to abuse their position of authority by being overbearing and exasperating their children.

Having said this, it is clear that Paul sees that the Old Testament commandment carries down to the New Testament people of God.

They are to be marked as people who honour their parents of both sexes.

God has forgiven them.

He has changed their hearts.

The hearts of father are to be turned to their children.

And the hearts of children are to be turned to their fathers.

Moreover, Paul clearly thinks that living by God's word in this area will bring rewards.

It will make things go well with the people concerned.

For God's laws are intended for their good, not their harm.

Living in the modern world

Okay, we have gone for a lightning tour of what the Bible has to say.

Now let's turn our eyes to the modern world and see how we can draw these things together.

Child abuse and elderly abuse

Let's look at the issue of child abuse and elderly abuse.

The first thing to say is human sin is never an excuse in God's eyes.

From the very first page of the Bible to the very last, God has a particular interest in the poor and disadvantaged.

He reaches out in care for them and protects them.

And he tells his people that they must do the same.

What's more, God is clear that wherever sin threatens the life or health of the Christian it must be dealt with quickly and thoroughly.

The threatened one must be protected.

And the abusive one must be dealt with in such a way that they can no longer cause a threat.

So, what does this mean for us?

First, it means that wherever we see children abusing parents or parents abusing children within our own community we are duty bound to act.

Second, it means that where our society gives us the possibility of speaking out and affecting societies norms we must do so.

Third, it means that we should do what we can to provide refuge and help to those who are victims.

And fourth, it means that we should do what we can to point people toward Jesus who can both forgive the sinner, change hearts, and bring human reconciliation.

Adult and single

As I surveyed the Old and New Testaments earlier, I specifically talked about what happens when you get married.

However, there is a whole other group of people affected, isn't there?

You see, in today's world adult children are not necessarily married.

How should they act?

What should their relationship be with their parents.

Well, I'm not sure that the Bible addresses this issue.

So, let me see if I can give you some advice that I think is informed and based on wisdom.

Think about it.

See if you think I'm right.

And talk to me about the issue.

Okay, let's see what we can say.

The first thing to say is that you are in the same situation as the married people in that God wants you to honour your mother and father until the day that you die.

Second, I think that while you continue to live in their house and dependent upon them then your attitude toward them and their rules should not change unless they wish it to.

Third, once you have moved from living in their house and being financially dependent upon them, I think you should act toward them as a married person acts toward parents.

Obedience (Authority and obedience)

Okay, before wrapping up I need to talk about authority and obedience.

2 sorts of authority – that because of status and that because of content

When status agrees with content – obey without question

When status disagrees with content – disobey status but explain.

When status speaks on something on which content has nothing to say – discuss but obey

Living under Christ

We are Christians.

We are different to the world.

We know Christ.

We have experienced his forgiveness.

We have seen the Fatherhood of God.

If we are young, we should honour our parents.

Honour in our language (i.e. in the way we talk about them).

Honour them in our obedience.

Honour them in our love and respect and in the weight we give to their opinion.

And if they are old, we should honour our parents.

Honour them by giving them our presence.

By contacting them.

By not allowing them to be lonely.

By listening to them.

By making sure they are adequately cared for (not just financially but socially and in terms of family).

Honour them by giving them glory and honour.