

## **EXODUS 20.12: HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER!**

*Preached 18 June 2006*

### **1. PARENTS CAN BE A PROBLEM**

The story is told of a father who sent his teenage son to attic to get the old horse blanket. He explained to his son that grandpa was getting very old & cantankerous, so they were going to send him away. The heavy horse blanket was to be used to keep him warm as he rode away in the buggy.

A few minutes later the son returned with half of the blanket & handed it to his father.

The father in startled amazement asked, "*What happened to the blanket?*"

The teenage son replied: "*I'm saving the other half for you!*"

Parents can be a problem – certainly for teenagers!

- Why does my mother insist on my bedroom being kept tidy?
- Why does my father insist on my returning home at such a ridiculously early hour?
- Why can't I be free to do my own thing?

Parents are a real pain when we are young.

On the other hand, teenagers should take note of what Mark Twain once had to say about his father: "*When I was 14 my father was so ignorant I could hardly bear him, but by the time I was 21 I was amazed to see how much he had learned in 7 years*".

But its not just when we are young that parents are a problem. ***Many adults find there comes a stage when their parents become even more of a problem.***

What do we do when our parents begin to get old - when they are no longer able to care for themselves - when their powers of body/mind begin to fail?

According to an article in the Guardian earlier this year (March 8, 2006), health expectancy in the UK is growing more slowly than life expectancy.

Did you know that after the age of 40, the brain decreases in volume & weight by 5% every decade. This brain shrinkage affects people differently – some remain relatively unaffected, while others, alas, develop Alzheimer's disease.

***What are we supposed to do when our parents begin to get frail?***

On certain South Sea islands, feeble male 'senior citizens' were forced to inch their way to tops of tall coconut palms. The trees were then shaken vigorously by the tribe's young bucks on the ground below! The old boys who managed to hang on were allowed to stay on in this world a while longer!

### **2. PARENTS ARE TO BE HONOURED**

The Bible is quite clear what we are to do with parents.

The 5th commandment says: "**Respect** (NRSV: 'Honour') **your father and your mother, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you**" (Ex 20.12)

NB ***this commandment is primarily directed to adults*** - not to children.

Not just for minors, but for those who have passed the magic age of 18 or 21.

There is no particular age at which people cease to be children of parents.

Furthermore, OT scholars point out that *the equal status of the mother is significant*. The OT world was predominantly a male world, and yet mothers are to be honoured as much as father.

### *The message of the OT*

It is not without significance that this is the first of the 10 commandments that deals with our responsibilities toward others.

We are perhaps sometimes tempted to think that it is far more important not to kill/steal rather than not to honour one's parents. But the OT treats this command as of the greatest importance.

In the OT the sternest of penalties were threatened against those who broke this command. E.g.

- Lev 20.9/Ex 21.17: "**All who curse father or mother should be put to death**"
- Prov 20.20: "**If you curse your parents, your life will end like a lamp that goes out in the dark**"
- Prov 30.17: "**Those who make fun of their father or despise their mother in her old age ought to be eaten by vultures, or have their eyes picked out by wild ravens**"

### *The message of Judaism*

Jews down thro the ages have taken their responsibilities toward their parents seriously. E.g. we read in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus 3.1ff: "**Whoever honours his father atones for his sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure**".

There were all sorts of tales about how rabbis sought to carry out this command.

The great 'folk hero' in this respect = *Rabbi Tarfon*.

- When his mother wished to get up on her bed, Rabbi Tarfon would stoop down & make his bent back a step for her
- On one occasion his mother's sandals split in such a way that she couldn't mend them. Rather than allow her to walk across the courtyard barefoot, Rabbi Tarfon put his hands under her feet at each step she took!

### *The message of Jesus*

Jesus felt this commandment to be important

- Mk 10.17-19: to the rich young ruler who asked, "**Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?**", he quoted the 5th command as one of the basic commands which everybody who sought goodness & life must obey.
- Mk 7.9-13: on another occasion he accused those who sought to put religious duties before duties to parents as "cancelling out" the word of God. When you are asked by your aged parents to help, he said, it is not good enough to say: "*We cannot help you. All our goods are dedicated to God (Corban)*". You have a God-given duty to care for parents.

***Jesus not only told others to keep this commandment, he kept this commandment himself.***

- Have you ever wondered why ***Jesus spent 10/11ths of his life at home?***  
He died when 33, but only started his public ministry when 30. Why?  
Probably Joseph died early – there is no mention of Joseph after the occasion when Joseph & Mary took Jesus up to Jerusalem when 10 - e.g. not around at the wedding in Cana. If Joseph died early, then Jesus as the eldest would have had to undertake the support of his mother, brothers & sisters. Only when his duties discharged, did he set about his preaching, teaching & healing ministry.
- Even at the end ***Jesus did not forget his mother.*** Amazingly, as he was breathing his last on the cross: **"Jesus saw his mother & the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, 'He is your son'. Then he said to the disciple, 'She is your mother'. From that time the disciple took her into his home"** (Jn 19.25-27)

### **3. WE ARE TO LOVE, RESPECT AND CARE FOR OUR PARENTS**

OK: parents are to be honoured. But what does this actually mean? How does all this work out in practice?

If I were talking to a group of children I might well say that in the first place we honour by obeying them. Paul, e.g. wrote: **"Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents always, for that is what pleases God"** (Col 3.20).

But obeying parents is simply a phase. A phase we leave once we leave home and enter the world of adulthood. *"Obedience refers to actions and continues for a limited number of years, whereas honour is an attitude that continues all through life"*.

There is no one specific behaviour that is commanded - an open-endedness about it.

- The Anglican Catechism states that this Commandment means *"to love our parents, honour our parents, and succour our parents"*
- John Calvin wrote that we should *"look up to those who God has placed over us and treat them with honour, obedience and gratefulness"*.
- The Oxford Thesaurus lists the following synonyms for honour: *"reverence, respect, obedience, gratitude, trust, confidence, praise, attention, esteem, adore, consideration and care"*.

[John Durham, Word Commentary: *"To 'give honour' to father and mother means more than to be subject to them, or respectful of their wishes: they are to be given precedence by the recognition of the importance which is theirs by right, esteemed for their priority, and loved for it as well".*]

I want to suggest that we honour our parents by loving, respecting and caring for them.

a) **Loving them**

Every now and then the BBC broadcasts a distress message: "*Would X, last known to be living at... , please visit his father/mother who is now dangerously ill*". This is incredibly sad. Clearly there has been a total breakdown in relationships.

Where the fault lies, will no doubt vary. It takes two to tango. It may well be that the parent is to blame - but tonight I want to emphasise the need for children to ***work at their relationships with their parents***. And we work at that relationship in the first instance by loving them.

Perhaps ***most of us here we don't need to be told to love our parents***.

Expressing love toward our parents is natural and spontaneous....

***Yet not all parents are immediately lovable.***

Some can be amazingly selfish individuals, who frankly scarcely deserve any love.

- Susannah in her line of work often has to deal with ***feckless mothers*** who have run through one boyfriend after another, with little thought of the effect this may have on their children.
- Or there are ***workaholic fathers*** who are so tied up with their work, that they never ever make time for their children. Are they to expect their children in later life to love them, even when they showed so little love to them?

Sadly there are many parents who do not deserve to be loved.

But from a Christian perspective, ***love is not necessarily about loving people who are immediately lovable and desirable.***

Love at its best is the love that God showed to us, when he sent his Son to be our Saviour. ***God loves us, not because of what we are, but because of who we are - his children.***

It is this kind of love that we are called to reflect in family life.

Husbands are to love their wives, and wives their husbands - even if they have burnt the toast!

Likewise children honour their parents by loving them, even if their love has been limited and inadequate.

***Love is not just about hugs and kisses*** - although I believe there is a place for a display of physical affection - it is about actively seeking the very best for them.

***Love is not just saying "I love you"*** - although there is a place for verbalising love - it is about practical acts of kindness.

To honour a parent is to love them, even tho' they may not totally deserve that love.

b) **Respecting them**

What does it mean to respect a parent?

Let me first state, what it does not mean. ***It does not mean that we obey their wishes.***

It is possible for adults to honour their parents - and yet not do what they want them to do.

Indeed, it would be unnatural for an adult to continue to honour their parents by doing all they say - more than unnatural, it would be unhealthy.

Part of the task of parenting involves leading a child to become an independent being.

Some parents find this hard - they want to control their children long after their children have left the nest - hence the problem many of us have with our mother-in-laws

BUT this does not mean that we may become dismissive of our parents and their views. NB Martin Luther: Parents "*are not to be deprived of their honour because of their ways or their failings*". We are "*not to address them discourteously, critically, and censoriously, but...to hold our tongue, even if they go too far*"

Furthermore, there is such a thing as the 'wisdom of years'.

If we honour our parents, we will *still listen* respectfully to their views and opinions

*"That's OK, if you have a good set of parents. But suppose you come from a rotten home, where parents really were the dregs? What is there then to respect?"*

There are, alas, some extreme situations where parents have well & truly failed their children in every respect. But the extremes apart, *is there not something in our make-up which has been derived from our parents*, which should perhaps cause us to regard them with a certain respect? We are what we are, precisely because of them.

As our parents grow older, we show respect = by *letting them make their own decisions, so long as it is possible*.

We may disagree with them - we may feel it better for them to sell up and move into a home. But unless they are actually doing themselves harm, then we need to respect their freedom of choice. Indeed, this is part of being human.

Even toward the end, parents begin have become totally dependent on us, there still needs to be respect - they are still people in their own right.

NB Tim Stafford: "*Many children must 'parent' their own ageing parents, but this does not mean that their parents become children again. They are adults, now entering a new phase of life... Parents do not need to be scolded or patronised*"

### c) Caring for them

The Apostle Paul has some striking words to say about family responsibilities.

NB 1 Tim 5.4: "**If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should learn first to carry out their religious duties towards their own family and in this way repay their parents and grandparents, because this is what pleases God**".

True, these words were written before the welfare state with its provision for old people came into being - but they are still relevant - and all the more so, now that we seem to be experiencing the demise of the welfare state.

*We have a God-given duty to make some return to their parents.*

Sometimes we forget the sacrifice that our parents have made. It is not just the elderly who are frail - children in their first years are too. Parents often make huge sacrifices in order to care physically and financially for their kids.

It is not unreasonable for children in turn to make some sacrifices for their parents.

What exactly it means to care for our parents - particularly as they grow older - will vary from circumstance to circumstance.

- For some it may involve ensuring that they have all they need to continue to be able to live on their own.

- For others it may involve taking them into our home.
- While for yet others it may involve putting them into a home.

How precisely we care will vary - but the obligation to care is inescapable and on us all.

[d) by honouring their memory

NB Tim Stafford: "The last days of ageing may have been a nightmare. [Death, however] allows you to step back and see the whole. Going through photo albums, reading old letter,. sorting through possession, sharing memories... these are tasks that help you to remember what was good and laugh at what was not so good". NB funeral service - service of thanksgiving!]

#### 4. **WHY ARE PARENTS TO BE HONOURED?**

Acc to Ex 20: "**..that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you**".

Paul in Eph 6.2 describes this as "**the first commandment that has a promise added**".

But what exactly does God promise?

Is God really promising long life to all those who truly honour their parents?

Are we to infer that all centenarians have been good children, & that those who die early have been bad children? No.

##### *(a) For the welfare of the nation*

At this point we need to remember that ***the 10 commandments were in the first place addressed to a nation***. The context of the giving of the 10 commandments is the occasion when God made a covenant with Israel as a people.

Here is God's pattern for the life of Israel, and indeed for the life of every nation.

The promise therefore applies more to society than just you & me.

Individual longevity is not the issue. Rather God is saying that a nation will be strong, united & prosperous to the extent that children honour parents.

***A nation's future depends on the strength of family life.***

A healthy family = a vital keystone to the fabric of society.

Here is something our nation needs to heed today.

Society is the better for taking the 10 commandments seriously.

God says: "**Honour your father and mother**" - here is one of the basic building blocks if we would create an emotionally stable and secure society.

##### *(b) For our own personal welfare*

***The 10 commandments have also been given for our personal good.***

If we seek to live life on our own terms, we will end up being the losers.

True freedom and true happiness is only found as we follow our Maker's instructions.

Or to be specific in this context: if we honour our parents, then in turn our children may well honour us – so that ultimately we become the beneficiaries of our obedience!