

Words to Live By
"Fun with Parents"
Exodus 20:12, Mark 3:31-35

As I channel surfed the other day, I came across a movie called, "**Because I Said So.**" It's the story of a mother who relentlessly meddles in the lives of her adult children. She goes so far as to place an ad on the Internet seeking men to interview as possible husbands for her youngest daughter. Throughout the movie, she repeatedly tells her children what to do, and when asked why, she responds with the phrase, "Because I said so!" This may work with an eight year old, but not with adult children. Of course, it's a romantic comedy, so a lot of improbable things happen, but it all turns out well. It wasn't a great movie. But what I found noteworthy about it was how it illustrated the dynamic of love and conflict between parents and their adult children. The mother wanted to protect and care for her daughter, but the way she did it drove the daughter crazy. At the same time, the younger woman loved her mother and wanted to please her, but was struggling to build her own life. It's a universal theme. Parents usually do their best to love and care for their children, but they don't always express that love in ways that are helpful. Meanwhile, children love their parents and try to please them, while still making choices that are authentically their own. It isn't easy, but nearly all of us go through it. And so we come to our topic of the day in this series on the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment is to **honor your father and mother.**

As with most Biblical commandments, there are different ways of interpreting this one. At its most basic level, it has been seen as a command that young children obey their parents. This is, of course, appropriate - except in cases of neglect or abuse. With a broader focus, the commandment has also been seen as referring to the relationship between parents and their adult children. The Biblical authors certainly intended it to include the parent-child relationship at all ages. Our tradition has at times taken the commandment even further, and seen it as requiring obedience to authority figures in every area of life. I suspect that this is beyond the original intent of the Biblical authors. What is certainly true is that while the commandment includes our biological parents, but it also applies to step-parents, adoptive parents, grandparents, and others who have provided care and nurture for us. I've known more than one person who was abandoned or ignored by their biological parents, but received parent-like care from others who have "unofficially" adopted them. The commandment relates to that kind of relationship too! In Biblical thought, it is vitally important to honor those who gave you biological life, as well as all those who have contributed to your growth and development. **We are to respect those who have given us life and nurtured us.**

So we are to honor our parents and parent-like figures. But what does it mean to honor them? It is a question of respect. And respect is not the same as blind obedience. To respect your parents or anyone else means that you will treat them kindly and take them seriously. You will listen to them, and value their contribution to your life. You will be gracious towards them. You may or may not agree with them. As young children, respect typically includes obedience. As adults, we can still be respectful even if the choices we make are different from those our parents would have made. The point is to make choices informed by the best things our parents have taught us, and to reflect the best things about them in our own lives. Even for those of us whose parents have long since departed from this earthly life, the commandment

still has relevance for this reason. Your parents don't need to be alive for you to honor or respect them. Even when they are gone, you honor them by keeping alive the good things they taught you, and passing on their wisdom to future generations. No doubt, there will be things they taught you that aren't so helpful, or perhaps which don't reflect the highest ideals. The honoring of one's parents calls us to hold on to that which is best, and to gracefully let the rest slide. As a parent, there are things I hope my daughter has learned from me that she will carry with her and pass on, but there are also things I hope she can just forget about and leave behind. In fact, I'll feel the most honored if she can overlook the mistakes I have made, and focus on the good things I've tried to teach her. I certainly don't want her to go around telling everyone about stupid things I've done for the rest of her life. Unless, of course, she becomes a preacher, and has to find sermon illustrations, in which case, I'll understand.

If we are being completely honest, we must acknowledge that even the best parents are flawed, and that some parents leave their children very little positive to build on. Perhaps you've seen some of the news coverage of the conflict between actor Ryan O'Neal and his daughter Tatum. Ryan walked out on his family for another woman when Tatum was in her early teens. She felt abandoned and rejected by her dad. Worse yet, when she did see him, he put her in situations where she was surrounded by drug use and other inappropriate behavior. Is it any wonder that she became a drug addict herself and nearly wound up dying from it? Thankfully, she has begun to put her life back together and even seek reconciliation with her dad. For some people, it can be difficult to find good things to honor in their parents behavior, and the nature of the entire relationship can be destructive. What then, of the fifth commandment?

In our New Testament reading, Jesus shows us the deepest meaning of the commandment. Yes, we can honor our parents by upholding the best things we have learned from them, but **we ultimately honor them the best by being faithful to God.** Our New Testament reading shows Jesus putting a distinctive twist on what it means to be a family, and what it means to honor one's parents. Jesus is inside a building teaching a large group of people, when his mother and brothers arrive and ask to see him. Jesus could have just gotten up and gone out to talk to them. Indeed, he may have done so. But what the Scriptures record is that he asked the question, "Who are my mother and brothers?" And he looked at those gathered around him and said, "Here are my mother and brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus takes the notion of family and expands it dramatically, to include all those who seek to do God's will. He looks beyond purely biological connections to see a family connection with all of God's children. This would have been shocking to many people, because for them the biological connection was everything. But Jesus shows that there is something even more fundamental – our common status as children of God, and our shared responsibility to do God's will. And so, while Jesus surely loved and respected his mother, he recognized the best way to honor her was to obey the God who gave life to them both. From what we see of Jesus' mother Mary in Scripture, I think it is safe to assume that she understood this, because she was very much obedient to God herself.

The goal of the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers is **that we may enjoy God's blessings.** That isn't to say that God will curse us and send plagues upon us if we don't respect our parents or the others who have raised us. But in the reading from Exodus, the

ability of the people to live long, prosperous lives in the land that God gives them is tied to their finding a way to honor those who gave them birth. And if we want to really live a life of blessing and joy, if we want to experience the best that God has to give us, we need to learn how to honor our parents – whether they be biological parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, or even people who acted as surrogate parents when our biological parents were not able to care for us. If we don't, we wind up prisoners of past mistakes. Some folks go through life carrying bitterness and pain because of things that went wrong during their formative years, and this pain shapes their lives in negative ways – as in the case of Tatum O'Neal, and many others. The call to honor our mothers and fathers is a call to seek out the best things they taught you, the things that most enable you to honor God, and hold on to them, while forgiving and maybe even forgetting the mistakes that were made. And even if your childhood was so traumatic that you can't remember anything good, you can still honor them by turning evil to good, and faithfully following Jesus. Think about it this way – what would be a better way to honor your parents – to repeat their mistakes, or to transform those mistakes into something good, and passing on healthier ways of living to future generations? I recently read an article about some people who are the descendents of slave owners and former slaves. Some of them have been seeking each other out and reconnecting because of their shared past. In many cases, the result is reconciliation and the healing of a painful past. While the great-great grandparents of these people may have been horrified to see what they are doing, they are actually honoring their ancestors by turning evil to good. We can choose to seek the good and build on it. The vast majority of us have a lot of good things we can build on that our parents have given us. And even if we don't, we can all honor our parents by being the best people we can be, and living in faithfulness to God. If we can't do this, we'll find ourselves stuck repeating negative patterns and destructive behaviors. But when we can adopt this approach to honoring our parents, we will be free to grow and learn and mature at any age, and to embrace the kind of blessed life that God wants us to have.